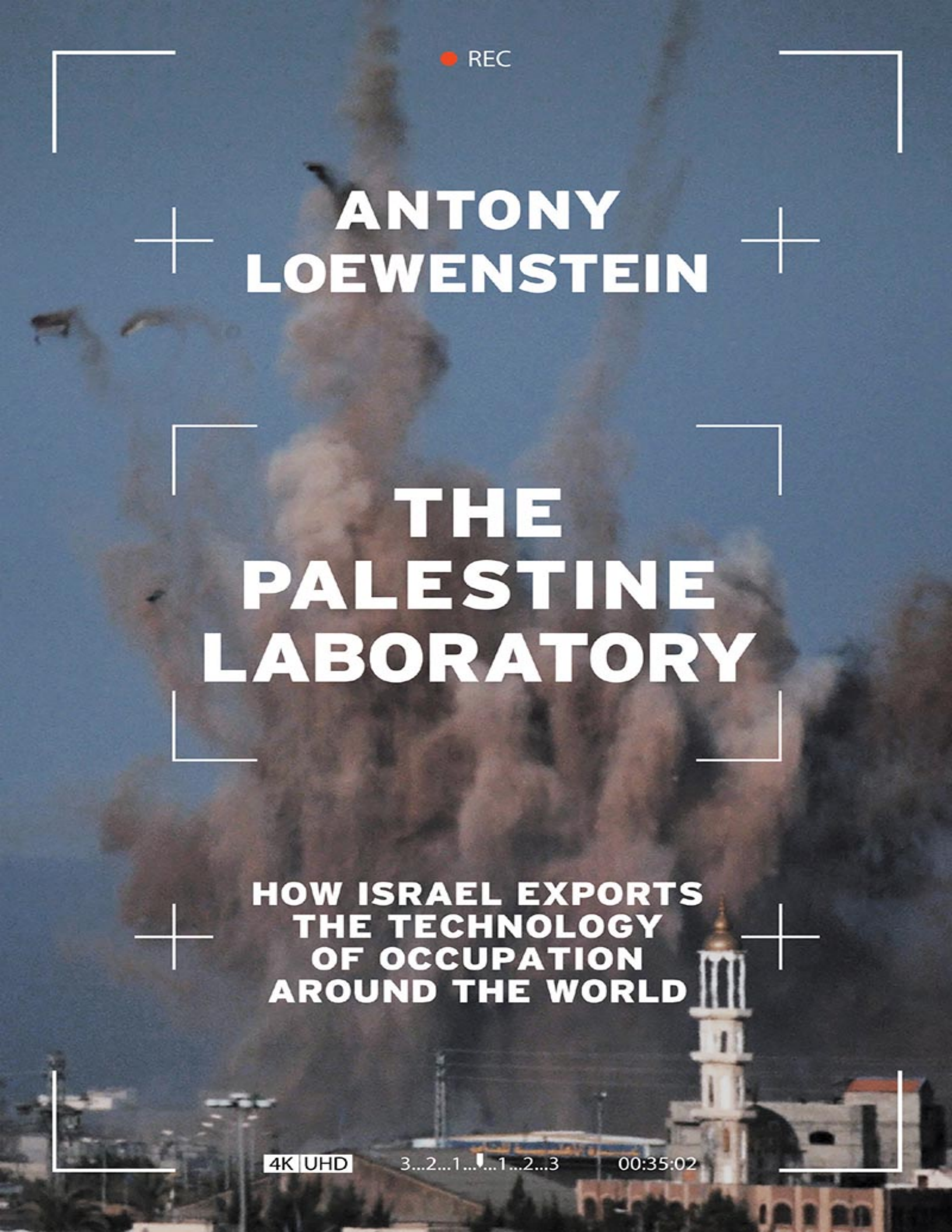
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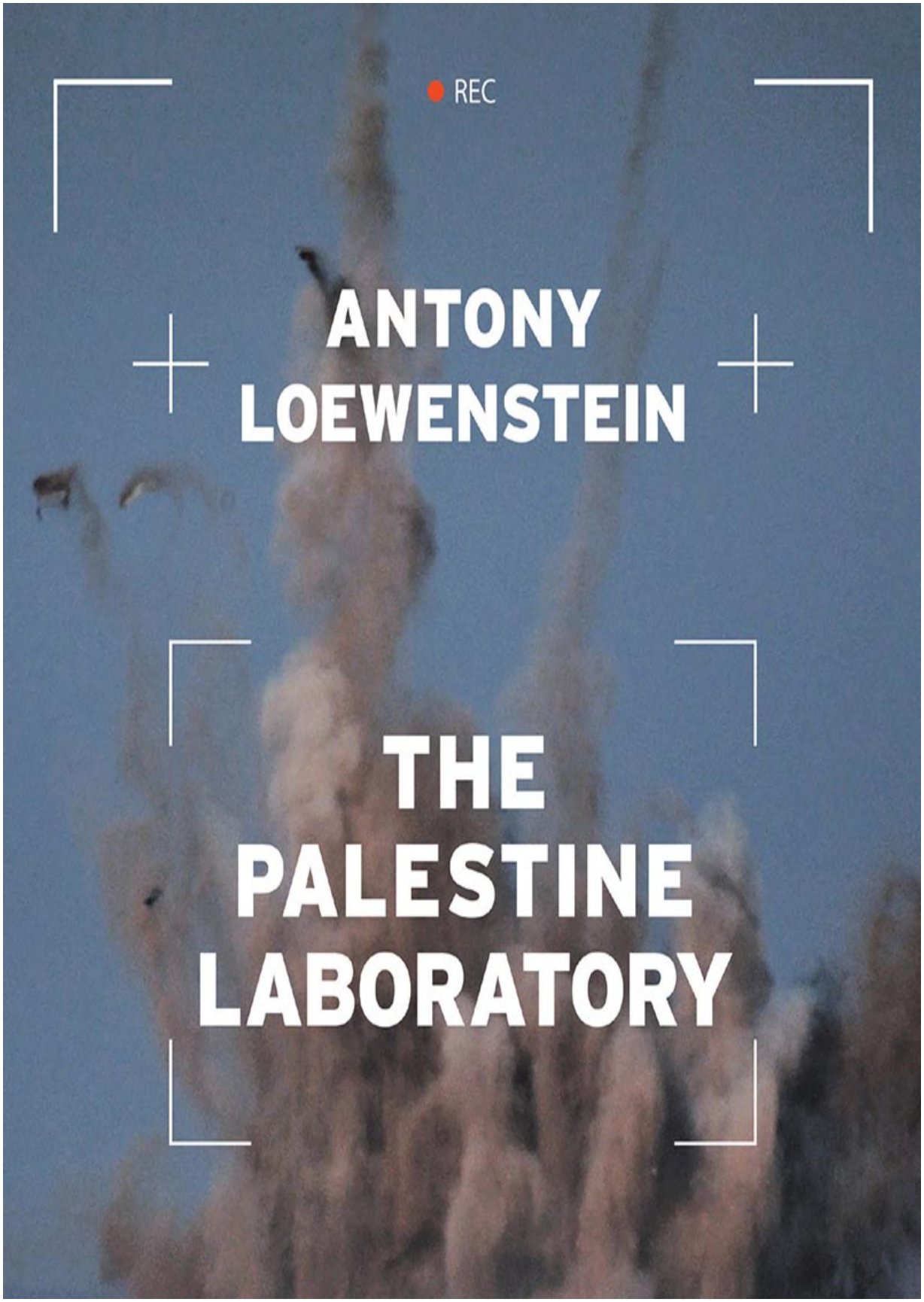
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The Palestine Laboratory

The Palestine Laboratory

How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation around the World

Antony Loewenstein

VERSO
London • New York

In solidarity with the Palestinians and Israelis fighting for a just future

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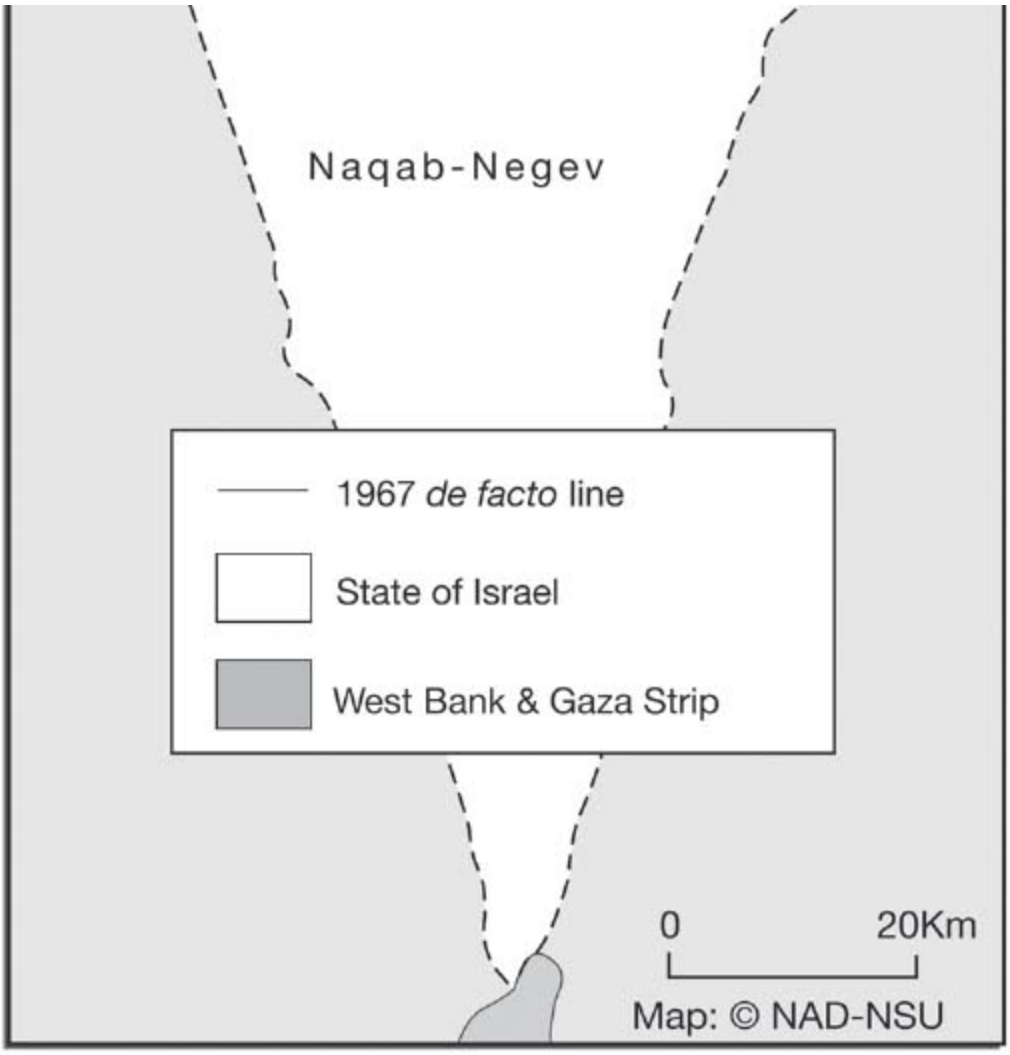

The 1949 Armistice Lines

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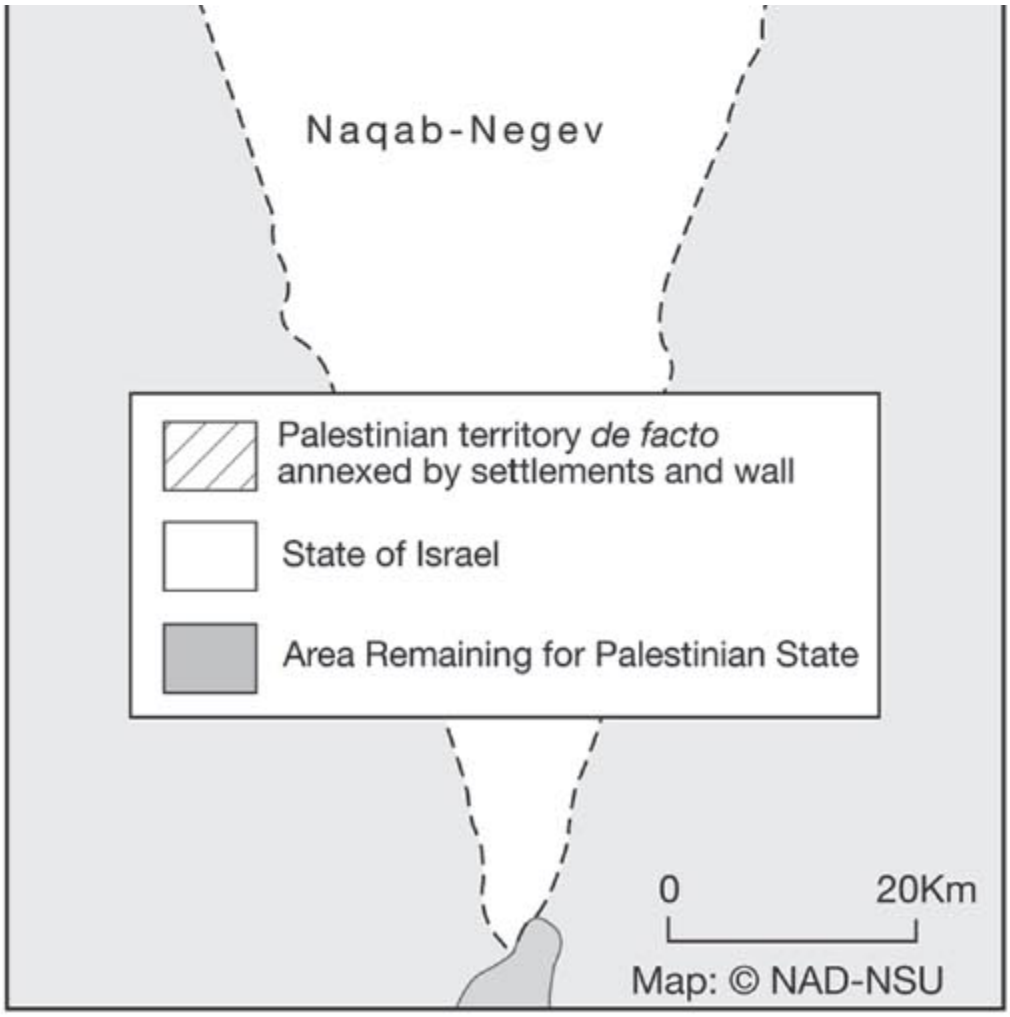

Israeli Settlements on the West Bank as of 2020

Introduction

South Africa's apartheid lasted 46 years. Israel's is at 72 and counting.

Nathan Thrall, *London Review of Books*, 2021

When I first started reporting on Israel/Palestine in the early 2000s, it was the early days of the internet and mainstream media gatekeepers rarely allowed more critical voices against Israeli occupation to be heard. I grew up in a liberal Zionist home in Melbourne, Australia, where support for Israel wasn't a required religion but certainly expected. My grandparents had fled Nazi Germany and Austria in 1939 and came to Australia as refugees. For them, although they weren't avid Zionists, it made sense to view Israel as a safe haven in case of future strife for the Jewish people.

Despite this sentiment running through the Jewish community in most of the world, I soon became uncomfortable with both the explicit racism against Palestinians that I heard and knee-jerk support for all Israeli actions. It was like a cult where opposing voices were condemned and cast out. I remember my Jewish friends during my teenage years, who mouthed what they had heard from their parents and rabbis. Few of them had been to Israel, let alone Palestine, but the dominant narrative was based around fear; Jews were constantly under attack and Israel was the solution. No matter that Palestinians had to suffer to make Jews feel safe. This felt like a perverted lesson from the Holocaust. I'm now both an Australian and German citizen due to my family's escape from Europe before World War II. I'm an atheist Jew.

By the time I visited the Middle East for the first time in 2005, I still held illusions about Israel and Palestine. I said I believed in a two-state

solution and the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. I don't support either now. In the years after that initial trip, I reported from the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, documenting the increasing Israeli stranglehold in Palestine. I lived in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020 and regularly saw Israeli police harass and humiliate Palestinians. The daily grind of occupation was oppressive for those who weren't Jewish. It made me ashamed of what was being done in my name as a Jew. Today I support a one-state solution to the conflict where all its citizens can live equally.

My evolution in the last twenty years mirrors the growing global awareness of what Israel has always been and where it's headed. The public debate around this has shifted perceptibly since the early 2000s. Facts on the ground have dictated it.

Israel's leading human rights group, B'Tselem, released a report in early 2021 that concluded that there is a "regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. This is apartheid." Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International followed suit soon after. More than half a century of occupation and these prominent reports made a difference. Although Palestinians had been saying it for decades, the shift took time to filter through to Western elites and populations. Israel's illiberalism is now impossible to deny, and many Western liberals no longer feel constrained in saying it.[1]

A quarter of US Jews in a 2021 survey agreed that Israel was an apartheid state. Even the publisher of *Haaretz*, Israel's most progressive, albeit Zionist, newspaper, admits it. "The product of Zionism, the State of Israel, is not a Jewish and democratic state but instead has become an apartheid state, plain and simple," Amos Schocken wrote in 2021. "One can say many things about this, but one cannot say Israel is fulfilling Zionism as a Jewish and democratic state."[2]

Israel's claim to be a thriving democracy in the heart of the Middle East is challenged by the facts. All media outlets in Israel, along with publishers and authors, must submit stories related to foreign affairs and security to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) chief military censor before publication. No other Western country has such a system. It's an archaic regulation that began soon after Israel was born. The censor has the power to entirely block the story or partially redact it.[3] What's deemed valid is highly questionable,

since the priorities of the national security establishment will be very different to what's required for a healthy, democratic state. This contradiction was clear when Israel's chief censor, Ariella Ben Avraham, left her position in 2020 and took a job with the country's leading cyber-surveillance company, NSO Group.

For decades it was largely only Jews who debated Israel and Palestine in the Western media. Occupied Palestinians were talked about and not heard. A 2020 study by the University of Arizona's Maha Nasser laid bare this silencing. Palestinians wrote less than 2 percent of opinion pieces in the *New York Times* between 1970 and 2020. It was 1 percent in the *Washington Post*.[4] Today it's not uncommon to hear and see Palestinians, from Noura Erekat to Yousef Munayyer to Mohammed El-Kurd, offer a different point of view.

Any reportage from Palestine is still challenging. Ahmed Shihab-Eldin is an American Kuwaiti, and an Emmy award–winning journalist of Palestinian descent. He told me about working on a story for Vice in 2015 that featured Swedish-born settlers destroying a Palestinian family's home in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem. His crew had filmed the settlers throw a young Palestinian girl's toys out of the house, removing pipes, and destroying furniture. Vice cut the scene.

"Dude, the settlements are crazy controversial," a Vice editor told Shihab-Eldin. "Some see them as illegal. Israel doesn't. So we can't show this confrontation because it will make it show too much of one side's argument and further complicate an already complicated story."

Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians and state-backed racial profiling has made it extremely popular even with groups who traditionally loathe Jews. An Israeli flag was seen at the January 6, 2021, rally outside the US Capitol before it was stormed by right-wing protestors. It's been hung alongside the Confederate flag across the United States.[5] Far-right protestors in the UK, Germany, and other countries wave the Israeli flag at rallies.

Alt-right leader Richard Spencer was effusive in his admiration for Israel in 2018, saying, "Jews are, once again, at the vanguard, rethinking politics and sovereignty for the future, showing a path forward for Europeans." He made this statement in the wake of Israel's Nation State Law, which formalized its Jewish supremacy over any illusion of

democracy for all of its citizens. Spencer has called himself a “white Zionist.”

He was tapping into the widespread belief within elements of the far right that Israel is in the forefront in defending Western civilization against the Muslim hordes. Secularism precludes successful patriotic collaboration. Religiosity is the goal. The Jewish state stands proudly for strong borders, rejects attempts by international governing bodies like the UN to meddle in its affairs, and promotes itself as being a state for the Jewish people above all else.

The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said was clear eyed about the true origins of the Jewish state. “Zionism was a hothouse flower grown from European nationalism, anti-Semitism and colonialism,” he wrote in 1984, “while Palestinian nationalism derived from the great wave of Arab and Islamic anti-colonial sentiment, has since 1967, though tinged with retrogressive religious sentiment, been located within the mainstream of secular post-imperialistthought.”[6]

It’s this extreme form of nationalism that’s been commercialized for more than fifty years. Shir Hever is one of the most insightful experts on the economic aspects of the Israeli occupation. Israeli arms manufacturers sell a particular message, he told me, that reflects the lived experience of brutalizing Palestinians. “If you listen to the [Israeli] arms companies themselves when they go to Europe to sell their products, they keep repeating the same mantra,” he said. “They say that these Europeans are so naive. They think that they can have human rights. They think that they can have privacy but that’s nonsense. We know that the only way to fight terrorism is to judge people by how they look and the color of their skin.”

Israel’s status as an ethnonationalist state was there from its birth in 1948, but it’s been turbo-charged in the twenty-first century. The Israeli leader who most successfully pursued this policy was Benyamin Netanyahu, a fervent believer in the endless occupation of Palestinian lands. He was the longest serving prime minister in the country’s history, though finally lost office in 2021 after more than twelve years leading the government. He won re-election in November 2022 with the most right-wing coalition in the country’s history. His vision itself has won, since he convinced many other countries to use Israel as a model. Netanyahuism is an ideology that will outlive him.

“The role of Israel is to serve as a model,” said neoconservative Elliott Abrams, who was a key architect of the “war on terror” under US presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump. Speaking at a conservative conference in Jerusalem in May 2022, he urged the world to follow the Jewish state as “an example in military might, in innovation, in encouraging childbirth.”[7]

Israel has developed a world-class weapons industry with equipment conveniently tested on occupied Palestinians, then marketed as “battle-tested.” Cashing in on the IDF brand has successfully led to Israeli security companies being some of the most successful in the world. The Palestine laboratory is a signature Israeli selling point.

Think of the infamous Pegasus mobile phone-hacking software, built by Israeli cyber firm NSO Group, and how it proliferated during the Netanyahu era as Israel used it to rally diplomatic support internationally. “Israel’s old-style ethnonationalism and its hard-line treatment of Palestinians, once an international liability, have become an asset,” wrote Max Fisher and Amanda Taub in the *New York Times* in 2019.[8]

This advantage has been a long time in the making. Reading journalist Robert Fisk’s seminal account of the Lebanese civil war, *Pity the Nation*, it’s clear that the Israeli military and rhetorical playbook was being developed in the early 1980s when it disastrously invaded and occupied Lebanon. The Israelis then used the term “surgical precision” when describing the deadly attacks by its air force. That was a lie because countless innocent Lebanese were murdered.

Nonetheless, as I show in this book, despite floundering militarily in Lebanon, Israel used the war as a selling point for its weaponry and tactics. Its propaganda offered an attractive elixir to nations that bought the illusion that the Jewish state could help them with their own internal problems. There was some truth to that claim, though it came at a high human cost.

Netanyahuism aims to crush Palestinian aspirations. During President Barack Obama’s term, he argued that it was “unsustainable” to indefinitely occupy another people because racism and colonialism were relics from a different era. Netanyahu vehemently disagreed. According to Netanyahu, Jewish writer Peter Beinart explained, “the future belonged not to liberalism as Obama defined it—tolerance, equal rights, and the rule of law—but to authoritarian capitalism: governments that combined aggressive and often

racist nationalism with economic and technological might. The future, Netanyahu implied, would produce leaders who resembled not Obama, but him."[9]

The message espoused by Netanyahu and his successors is that Israel is the ideal modern nation-state that rejects the multicultural assumptions of Western Europe and other parts of the West. During a meeting in 2017, Netanyahu was caught on a hot mic telling the leaders of Hungary and Czech Republic not to buy into the European Union's insistence that collaboration on technology was conditioned on progress around peace talks with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu was right. The EU never stopped working with Israeli companies despite the country's occupation, but his comments were instructive. "Europe must decide if it wants to live and prosper or wither and disappear," he said. "I see you're shocked because I'm not being politically correct … We're part of the European culture. Europe ends in Israel. East of Israel, there's no more Europe."

Netanyahu was proud of his work. Israeli journalist Gideon Levy told me about a private meeting that he had attended in 2016 with the then prime minister alongside the editorial board of his newspaper, *Haaretz*. Netanyahu spoke for four hours. Levy said he was in good spirits and didn't need any food or drink, and with a world map behind him, he had listed his foreign policy achievements as he viewed them, including building good relations with India, Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the US. He said that Israel was a world leader in weapons and cyber and water technologies.

"Based on the colors of his map of the world, it's [the world] almost all in our hands," Levy later reported. "After meeting with 144 statesmen, all that's left is a problem with Western Europe. Everyone else is on our side, or almost there (and I believe that he's quite right)."[10] Netanyahu meant that Western Europe was insignificant. Levy said to me that Western Europe should represent liberalism, culture, and democracy, but Netanyahu perceived them as a noisy rabble. Beyond the rhetoric, the EU is Israel's biggest trading partner and deepened its ties with Israel during the Netanyahu years even though the occupation in Palestine grew harsher.

Netanyahu's successor as prime minister, Naftali Bennett, was even more explicit in 2015 about Israel's role as a "beacon of freedom." Then economy minister and leader of the far-right Jewish Home party, Bennett

spoke directly to the camera while standing in the West Bank. After warning that Israel was surrounded by Muslim terrorists on all sides, he said, “Israel is in the forefront of the global war on terror. This is the frontline between the free and civilized world and radical Islam. We’re stopping the wave of radical Islam from flowing from Iran and Iraq all the way to Europe. When we fight terror here, we’re protecting London, Paris, and Madrid.” Bennett argued that it was impossible to ever give up the West Bank because “if we give up this piece of land and hand it over to our enemies, my four children down there in Raanana [a city in Israel] will be in harm’s way. It’s just one missile away from hitting them.”

He concluded by warning Europeans, and by implication anyone in the West who dared to suggest that Israel’s occupation was immoral, to place Israel as the tip of the spear in a global battle for democracy. “Your war for democracy starts here,” he said. “Your war for freedom of speech starts right here. The war for dignity and freedom starts right here.”

Israel as the global Sparta is an image that has been shared by Israeli leaders past and present. In the days after the Taliban reclaimed Afghanistan in August 2021, Netanyahu wrote on Facebook that the lesson he took from the experience was that “the correct doctrine is that we must not rely on others to keep us safe, we must defend ourselves with our own strength against any threat.”

Israel is admired as a nation that stands on its own and is una-shamed in using extreme force to maintain it.[11] Andrew Feinstein is a global expert on the illicit arms industry. He’s a former South African politician, journalist, and author. He told me about attending the Paris Air Show in 2009, the world’s largest aerospace industry and air show exhibition. In a pop-up luxury hotel, he saw Elbit Systems, Israel’s biggest defense company, advertising its equipment to an elite audience of global buyers. Elbit was showing a promotional video about killer drones, which have been used in Israel’s wars against Gaza and over the West Bank.

The footage had been filmed a few months before and showed the reconnaissance of Palestinians in the occupied territories. A target was assassinated. During the video, Feinstein said, “There was a bevy of very attractive young women, one of whom was kneeling next to the people with the best seats in the front row which had obviously been reserved for them. These were the generals and the procurement officers. I managed to get

myself a seat just behind one of these generals and listened to what was being told to them. There was a delight in how the young woman was explaining it all to him."

Months later, Feinstein investigated the drone strike and discovered that the incident featured in the video had killed a number of innocent Palestinians, including children. This salient fact wasn't featured at the Paris Air Show. "This was my introduction to the Israeli arms industry and the way it markets itself," he said. "No other arms-producing country would dare show actual footage like that."

Feinstein said it was inconceivable that Lockheed Martin or BAE Systems, two other major defense contractors with tentacles in global wars, would show to buyers "actual footage of bombing innocent civilians in Yemen or a drone strike anywhere in the Middle East. Israel is so far beyond the pale in the way that it operates and the way that it has oriented its economy. Then there is its general lawlessness and defiance of international law. They just don't give a damn."

Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Greg Grandin argues in his acclaimed 2006 book, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic*, that Washington has traditionally viewed Latin America as a "workshop or a training ground, where the United States could regroup during periods of retrenchment" and test new ways of controlling its neighbors.[12] Palestine is Israel's workshop, where an occupied nation on its doorstep provides millions of subju-gated people as a laboratory for the most precise and successful methods of domination.

Israel as the ideal ethnonationalist model is reliant on being able to commercialize this message. Although some countries want Israeli arms or technology just to spy or disrupt dissident behavior and have no interest in building their own ethnoreligious entity, many others buy into the myths about Israeli racial supremacy and want to emulate it in their own countries. Israel's defense industry is amoral because that's how it grows. It will sell to anyone except for official enemies like North Korea, Iran, or Syria.

According to Israeli military analyst and journalist, Yossi Melman, Israel spent the twentieth and twenty-first centuries advancing its international relations using what he calls "espionage diplomacy."[13] He means that the Israeli military establishment doesn't care that its tools of surveillance and death are ubiquitous across the globe, even though they

“knew very well the risks of selling such intrusive equipment to dubious regimes.” Israel “incubates arms dealers, security contractors and technological wizards, worships them and turns them into untouchable heroes for the homeland.”

The world is listening. Israeli arms sales in 2021 were the highest on record, surging 55 percent over the previous two years to US$11.3 billion. Europe was the biggest recipient of these weapons, even before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, followed by Asia and the Pacific. Rockets, aerial defense systems, missiles, cyberweapons, and radar were just some of the equipment sold by the Jewish state. The result is that Israel is now one of the top ten weapons dealers in the world, having sold a range of equipment to nations including India, Azerbaijan, and Turkey that worsened conflicts in their own regions. The Israeli government approved every defense deal brought to it since 2007, according to details uncovered in 2022 by Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack.

It’s arguable if any nation has interests other than its own, but Israel is almost unique among self-described democracies in not calling out or sanctioning atrocities worldwide. That undeniably helps its defense industry but little else. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Israel didn’t immediately condemn Russia and embrace Ukraine. Instead, because the Jewish state wants a free hand to continue bombing what it calls terrorist targets in Syria, Moscow, President Bashar al-Assad’s patron, had to be appeased.

The war brought up some extreme awkwardness within Israel when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke via video link to the Israeli Knesset in March 2022 and demanded more tangible support, including weapons. He compared his country’s perilous situation with the Holocaust, conveniently ignoring Ukrainian complicity in murdering Jews during World War II and the presence of neo-Nazi soldiers, the Azov Battalion, within the Ukrainian military today. Israeli politician Simcha Rotman rejected Zelenskyy’s request for assistance. “After all, we are a moral nation,” he claimed. “A light among nations.” Rotman was angry that Zelenskyy asked Israel to treat Ukrainians the same way as the Ukrainian leader said his country had treated Jews during the Holocaust.

Zelenskyy explained his own vision to Ukrainian journalists in April 2022 when he said that Israel was the ideal model for his country. “We will become a ‘big Israel’ with its own face,” he stated. “We will not be

surprised if we have representatives of the Armed Forces or the National Guard in cinemas, supermarkets, and people with weapons. Ukraine will definitely not be what we wanted it to be from the beginning. It is impossible. Absolutely liberal, European—it will not be like that. It [Ukraine] will definitely come from the strength of every house, every building, every person."[14] Days later, the NATO-backed think tank Atlantic Council published a "road map" by Daniel B. Shapiro, the former US ambassador to Israel under President Barack Obama, on how Ukraine could become a "big Israel."[15]

The Jewish Ukrainian president had form in this regard, praising Israel during the Kyiv Jewish Forum in late 2021. The Jewish state is "often an example for Ukrainians," he said, and "both Ukrainians and Jews value freedom." During the 2021 conflict between Hamas and Israel, Zelenskyy tweeted that Israel was the "victim" due to Hamas rockets falling on its cities.

Israel has often hedged its bets in times of war, unwilling to condemn Serbian crimes during the crisis in the Balkans in the 1990s. Even when the Serbs bombed markets in Sarajevo in 1994, killing over a hundred civilians, Israel refused to distinguish between the aggressor and the victim.[16]

Israel's posture around the Rwandan genocide in 1994 was even worse. The government dispatched a medical aid team to assist survivors in Rwanda, led by the minister of environmental protection, Yossi Sarid. But that mission was all for show, because the government had shipped weapons to the brutal Hutu regime, which had killed around 800,000 Tutsis in 100 days. Such shipments included Uzi submachine guns and hand grenades, both before and during the genocide. When Sarid was questioned about Israel supporting the Hutu-led massacres, he replied, "We have no control over where our weapons go."[17]

The world knew what was happening in Rwanda, both in the run-up to the genocide and during it, and yet did nothing. No amount of modern technology or heightened surveillance tools was going to stop it when Western powers armed the perpetrators. Israel had the choice at the very least to try to contain the massacres by using its vast surveillance powers to inform the Tutsis, but instead it threw a massive amount of fuel on the bonfire and thus became directly implicated in the slaughter.

In his 2019 book warning about the dangers of mass spying, *New Dark Age*, the British writer and artist James Bridle explained that surveillance "reveals itself as a wholly retroactive enterprise, incapable of acting in the present and entirely subservient to the established and utterly compromised interests of power. What was missing in Rwanda and Srebrenica [where over eight thousand Bosnian Muslims were murdered by Serbian militias in 1995] was not evidence of an atrocity, but the willingness to act upon it."[18]

Israeli caution toward Russia in 2022 was unsurprising because Israeli surveillance firm Cellebrite had sold Vladimir Putin phone-hacking technology that he used on dissidents and political opponents for years, deploying it tens of thousands of times. Israel didn't sell the powerful NSO Group phone-hacking tool, Pegasus, to Ukraine despite the country having asked for it since 2019: it did not want to anger Moscow. Israel was thus complicit in Russia's descent into autocracy.

Within days of the Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the global share prices of defense contractors soared, including Israel's biggest, Elbit Systems, whose stock climbed 70 percent higher than the year before. One of the most highly sought-after Israeli weapons is a missile interception system. US financial analysts from Citi argued that investment in weapons manufacturers was the ethical thing to do because "defending the values of liberal democracies and creating a deterrent … preserves peace and global stability."[19]

Israeli cyber firms were in huge demand. Israel's Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked said that Israel would benefit financially because European nations wanted Israeli armaments.[20] She said the quiet part out loud, unashamed of seeing opportunity in a moment of crisis. "We have unprecedented opportunities, and the potential is crazy," an Israeli defense industry source told *Haaretz*.[21]

It's not just Israel exporting its occupation expertise. Some Americans are keen to learn on the ground in the Jewish state itself before taking it back to their home countries. In 2004, the US-based pro-Israel Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a self-described civil rights organization, began sending US police delegations to Israel. It hoped to give these officers invaluable insights in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks into how Israel tackled counterterrorism. More than one thousand police have since visited

Israel with the ADL program and other pro-Israel groups. They learn what Israel has to tell them about suicide bombers, intelligence gathering, and terrorism.

The ADL has a long history as a virulent pro-Israel lobby group, masking itself in the language of human rights—however, it's never had time for Palestinian equality. In the 1990s, an ADL employee named Roy Bullock went undercover with left-wing and African American groups to gather information on perceived enemies of Israel.[22] The same man also passed on intel to the apartheid regime in South Africa. This operation fit a familiar pattern that continues to this day. A key ADL aim has always been to target critics of the Jewish state.[23]

Despite rumors to the contrary, there's no evidence that the police officer who killed black American George Floyd in May 2020, Derek Chauvin, learned his fatal knee-on-the-neck technique from training in Israel. Regardless, the IDF routinely uses this suffocating move on Palestinians. The aim of the police program, according to the ADL's director of national law enforcement initiatives, David C. Friedman, was to build connections "between law enforcement agencies in two democracies." The US police who went "come back and they are Zionists. They understand Israel and its security needs in ways a lot of audiences don't."[24]

The Israelification of US security services accelerated immediately after 9/11, though US law enforcement didn't need Israeli training to make it violent or racist. American law enforcement has a long history of harassing, abusing, arresting, and killing African Americans and other minorities without justification. Its roots lie in maintaining and defending slavery and white supremacy inside US borders—and mirror Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. They certainly learned from each other during the visits to Israel and the United States. In September 2022, the chief of the Israeli Border Police, Major General Amir Cohen, was hosted by his American counterpart, Raul Ortiz, head of the US Border Patrol. Ortiz said he was interested in learning about "non-lethal" methods used by the Israelis to disperse and suppress protests. Cohen displayed an Israeli drone that drops tear gas on protestors.[25]

During the Cold War, the US trained police forces in more than fifty countries to repress dissent.[26] Many Black Americans today view the police as occupying their cities as mass surveil-lance, drones, and facial

recognition technology become daily facts of life. Israeli surveillance company Cellebrite has sold its phone-hacking tools to countless police departments across the US.[27] “Israel is the Harvard of antiterrorism,” as US Capitol Police Chief Terrence W. Gainer pointed out in 2005.[28]

The Black Lives Matter movement explicitly connected the colonization of Palestine to the ways in which US law enforcement treated minorities. An African American member of Congress, Cori Bush, tweeted in 2021: “The Black and Palestinian struggles for liberation are interconnected, and we will not let up until all of us are free.”

The most successful campaign against the US police delegations to Israel was led by the US activist group Jewish Voice for Peace. It launched the Deadly Exchange campaign in 2017 to target these programs because they were where “state violence in the US and Israel converge.”[29]

In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, ADL senior management recommended ending the delegations in a secret draft internal memo. “In light of the very real police brutality at the hands of militarized police forces in the US,” they wrote, “we must ask ourselves difficult questions, like whether we are contributing to the problem. We must ask ourselves why it is necessary for American police, enforcing American laws, would need to [sic] meet with members of the Israeli military. We must ask ourselves if, upon returning home, those we train are more likely to use force.”[30] In the end, the ADL decided to keep the programs going.

One of the individuals behind the Deadly Exchange program, Efraim Efrati, a former IDF soldier who became a harsh critic of the occupation, told me that his research into the issue revealed a telling example of how the Israeli occupation is a powerful inspiration for those who want to hear and apply it back home. “I heard many US police were cynical about Israeli training,” he said. “Rather than practical advice, they saw it as a way to get promotion and learn more aggressive states of mind.”

The potency of Palestine as a laboratory for methods of control and separation of populations is my primary focus in this book. How Israel has exported the occupation and why it’s such an attractive model are examined in ways that frame the Jewish state as one of the most influential nations on the planet. The chapters that follow don’t just detail the many countries where Israeli tools and tracking have reduced democratic possibilities but

reveal a campaign to increase and influence similarly minded ethnonationalist entities.

That Israeli companies make money from the occupation shouldn't be a controversial view. My book is filled with examples of Israeli corporations showcasing what's been done in Palestine and how that model could be applied in other scenarios. And yet when I talked to one of Israel's most famous investigative journalists, Ronen Bergman, staff writer for the *New York Times* and author of the acclaimed 2018 book *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*, he demurred.

Bergman acknowledged that "the occupation is questionably moral. Controlling other people in another territory without giving the people their equal rights presents a challenge to Israeli democracy." But when pushed on how the occupation is used a marketing tool, he replied, "I don't know of a company that markets its products while boasting they were used against Palestinians as such. Of course, many of those products are counter-terrorism gear, so one can guess from where the organization and individuals targeted by them come from. There's a difference between something you advertise and something you say in a meeting with your potential client where I assume they feel less restricted."

He said that with the growth of the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) movement, Israeli defense companies "need to be careless from their point of view to be blunt and mention Palestinians. Boasting the use of a new machine gun in the occupied [Palestinian] territories in order to get someone interested in buying it could be very counterproductive." Nonetheless, the evidence is clear, and this book goes into detail about how the occupation is the ideal marketing tool.

The Palestine Laboratory is a warning that despotism has never been so easily shareable with compact technology. The ethnonationalist ideas behind it are appealing to millions of people because democratic leaders have failed to deliver. A Pew Research Center survey across thirty-four countries in 2020 found only 44 percent of those polled were content with democracy, while 52 percent were not.

Ethnonationalist ideology grows when accountable democracy withers. Israel is the ultimate model and goal.

1

Selling Weapons to Anybody Who Wants Them

I don't care what the Gentiles do with the arms. The main thing is that the Jews profit.

Israeli advisor in Guatemala from the 1980s

Daniel Silberman was six years old when the coup occurred in Chile. On September 11, 1973, Daniel was living with his family in the northern town of Chuquicamata. His engineer father, David Silberman, was an ally and friend of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende and worked as the general manager of the Calama copper mines. The Silberman family, who were nonobservant Jews, had moved to the desert area in 1971. Daniel told me that the Chileans there were "committed to change almost like [Israeli Prime Minister David] Ben-Gurion in the 1950s, who said he wanted to make the desert bloom." Only a handful of other Jewish families lived in Chuquicamata.

"The 11th of September 1973 was the day that changed our lives forever," Daniel wrote in the *Guardian* in 1998.[1] "The army took over, bombarding La Moneda [Chile's presidential palace] in Santiago, the Chilean capital, causing the deaths of many people, the President [Allende] among them, and arresting hundreds of others, shooting people down in the streets. Numerous people were brought to the National Stadium—the only place big enough to contain the crowds of the arrested. The humiliations and tortures for which the regime was to become famous started here."

The Silberman family's life was thrown into turmoil. Returning to Santiago soon after the coup, Daniel's father turned himself into the regime led by General Augusto Pinochet after many workers were killed by the army at the mine he managed. He hoped that he might be saved because he had done nothing wrong. Instead, he was given a court martial, without the right to a defense, and falsely accused of stealing US$13 million.

He was sentenced to thirteen years in prison, and Daniel's mother and children could visit David, but his condition deteriorated due to frequent beatings and torture, including electric shocks on his genitals. Outside jail, Daniel's family were followed by the secret police at all hours of the day and night, and his mother could not get a job because no organization would hire her. They survived by earning money from a family-run sewing workshop.

Daniel's mother was outraged at her husband's treatment and starting writing letters to influential people across the globe to free him. Near the end of 1974, she thought she had succeeded after a Chilean government investigation found that his entire trial had been illegal and he had been given amnesty. The one condition offered by Pinochet's regime was that David be released and the entire family sent into exile. Daniel's mother immediately told her relations in Israel that they would all be together there soon.

However, on October 4, 1974, David was kidnapped from a Santiago prison and never seen again. Daniel said that his family now believed his father was likely killed in 1974 though no body or burial ground was ever identified. "Memories of my father are faint," Daniel said. "We have no grave for my father or awareness of his remains." Between 1974 and 1977, Chilean officials told the family lies about David's whereabouts. Daniel said that he thought his father was murdered because Pinochet had a personal vendetta against him (having known him before the 1973 coup).

It was not until 1977 that the Silberman family eventually left Chile for good, and settled in Israel. Many years later, in 1991, after democracy reemerged in Chile, a government-led committee admitted the truth: David had been abducted from prison in an operation performed by DINA—the Chilean secret services. The family received a small amount of financial compensation but never any conclusive details about the nature of his death.

It took a long time for Daniel to become fully aware of US and Israeli state complicity in Pinochet's rule and his father's death. Documents

released by US president Bill Clinton in 1999 proved that the CIA had intimate knowledge of the coup leaders and both approved and assisted them. US President Richard Nixon had tried and failed to undermine Allende before his election in 1970, but having assumed power Washington worked to quash his ability to govern effectively. Covert operations were authorized to destabilize Allende's rule and Chilean military figures were corresponding with US officials before the coup, requesting assistance to guarantee its success. A CIA cable from September 21, 1973, read:

> The prevailing mood among the Chilean military is to use the current opportunity to stamp out all vestiges of communism in Chile for good. Severe repression is planned. The military is rounding up large numbers of people, including students and leftists of all descriptions, and interning them.[2]

The CIA were quick to downplay the consequences. A declassified cable from March 21, 1974, falsely stated that "the junta has not been bloodthirsty. The government has been the target of numerous charges related to alleged violations of human rights. Many of the accusations are merely politically inspired falsehoods or gross exaggerations." In fact, at least five thousand people were killed and more than thirty thousand tortured during Pinochet's reign of terror between 1973 and 1990. Further more, US officials supported and encouraged Operation Condor in the 1970s and 1980s. In this collective action, eight US-backed dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador kidnapped, tortured, raped, and killed political opponents both within their own borders and across the region.[3]

After Britain arrested Pinochet in London in October 1998 for human rights abuses under an international arrest warrant issued by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón, a flood of US-held documentary evidence was released detailing Western involvement with the Chilean junta. Pinochet was put under house arrest in London for one and a half years before being released back to Chile in March 2000 as a free man. His victims never received justice.[4]

Daniel said that the response in Chile to Pinochet's house arrest surprised and saddened him. "We didn't have any hopes that he would face trial," he said. "We were happy that he was arrested and there was interest worldwide about what had happened in Chile [after the 1973 coup]. The reactions in Chile were surprising, from the center and left, and suddenly

nationalism appeared, saying how dare a Spanish judge want to try Pinochet? If anybody should put him on trial, it should be us."

Israel's role in Pinochet's brutality is still clouded in some mystery since Israel refuses to release a full accounting of its role, but enough documents have been released to reveal a sordid relationship between Israel and the Chilean junta. Israel did not just train Chilean personnel to aid the repression of its own people. After a US arms embargo against Chile passed the US Congress in 1976, a cable from the US Embassy in Chile on April 24, 1980, acknowledged that Israel was a major arms supplier to Pinochet. Another US cable, on April 10, 1984, quoted the American undersecretary of state as saying that Israel was still one of the main weapons suppliers to the regime.[5] This steady stream of defense equipment undercut any potential benefits of the US arms embargo because Israel was not part of the deal.[6]

"Personally, it was shocking and painful when I discovered that Israel was aiding the Pinochet regime," Daniel said. "This was a country that gave my family a second chance. There's a lot of indifference in the Israeli public [about this collaboration] because many believe that Jews have suffered and we need to make friends globally to survive in a tough world."

A redacted CIA intelligence report from February 5, 1988, detailed the sophisticated weapons such as missiles, tanks, and aircraft that Israel was sending to the junta: "In our view, Israel, even under a Labor government, is unlikely to jeopardize its military relationship with Santiago to support a restoration of democracy in Chile."[7]

Although Israel offered huge amounts of support to the Pinochet regime, a small number of diplomats reportedly resisted. According to a story in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 2022, following the coup in 1973, the Israeli ambassador in Chile, Moshe Tov, worked to save around three hundred people, most of them Jews, from certain imprisonment or death. The dictatorship tried to stop the mission, turning up at the Israeli embassy in Santiago and demanding to enter and find the roughly thirty dissidents who were temporarily staying there, but Tov personally escorted all the critics to the airport to ensure safe passage out of the country.[8]

However, there are serious questions about the reliability of these claims and there's no official documentary evidence to prove it. Instead, according

to a declassified telegram from the time, Tov believed that criticism of the regime was unfair, and he helped launder Pinochet's image in Washington.[9]

In 2015, Daniel joined other survivors of Pinochet's regime and filed a legal suit in Israel with human rights lawyer Eitay Mack. They demanded that the country's authorities reveal its ties to the Chilean junta. Israeli citizen Eitan Kalinsky also filed an affidavit with the legal petition. Eitan and his wife had been sent to Chile in 1989 by the Jewish Agency for Israel, the largest Jewish nonprofit organization in the world. It was near the end of Pinochet's rule and they both attended public protests against the dictatorship. In his affidavit, Eitan explained what they saw:

> During one of the protests in Santiago there were vehicles with colored water cannons and the color of the water changed every few minutes, for example a very strong green. The Hashomer Hatzair [global Zionist youth movement] envoy told me: "Look, it says Hakibbutz Haartzi Hashomer Hatzair." We all knew it was made in Kibbutz Beit Alfa [in northern Israel]. The colored water pushed the people back with immense force and one shop window collapsed. I was an envoy of the State of Israel and could not criticize the state, so I kept my pain to myself.
>
> It was the left-leaning parents who turned to us and asked how Israel could support Pinochet. I did not say one bad word about Israel, but at home I shouted at the walls. The demonstration with the water cannons was tough. The protesters did not give up easily. They retreated only because of the water cannons. Others told me that at protests near the universities in the older city, there was even greater use of water cannons. I saw them only that time, at the protest marking the [1973] coup in September 1989.[10]

As they pursued their case, Daniel and his fellow petitioners faced years of Kafkaesque legal wrangling in Israel and an unwillingness by the Israeli establishment to release any substantive details. At first, the Israeli government claimed that there was no correspondence between Israel and Chile during Pinochet's rule. Then they said that they did not have the manpower to redact the documents that did not apparently exist after acknowledging that there were in fact nineteen thousand relevant documents in the archives. This was after saying that the files could not be released for another seventy years.

The court initially sided with the petitioners and told the government to appoint staff to wade through the relevant documents. The judge suggested that they meet with officials to design a schedule of how many documents would be released over a designated amount of time. After one year, Israel gave them twelve pages of irrelevant documents related to Chile in 1981. After they appealed to a higher Israeli court, the government claimed that it

had checked around four hundred documents and that it found no mentions of Daniel Silberman's family.

Daniel Silberman and his group then appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court in 2019 after hearing rumors that the government had moved documents from state to army archives. The Israeli army archives are not open to freedom of information requests and documents can be permanently suppressed there. "The Supreme Court always gave us a chance to speak," Daniel said, "but it was like a parade to give the impression that we're a democratic country."

In 2019, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case. While showing sympathy for the families searching for answers, security was cited as the ultimate reason that the information could not be publicly shared. One of the judges suggested that the petitioners approach the Mossad [Israel's national intelligence agency] because Mossad might have the required information. Daniel took this to mean that the Mossad likely had some relevant documents, but their lawyer got nowhere.

Fellow petitioner Lily Traubman, whose father was murdered by the Chilean junta and whose family fled to Israel in 1974, now lives in the Megiddo kibbutz in northern Israel. She remains haunted by what she saw in Chile after the 1973 coup. "I heard about people who disappeared, who were tortured and murdered," she told *Haaretz* in 2015. "There was a moment at which I could no longer leave my hiding place, and so I really didn't know what was happening."[11]

Like Daniel Silberman, Traubman felt duty-bound to keep pushing for transparency about Israel's role during Chile's darkest days. "Knowing and understanding what happened there involves a universal value of freedom," she said. "Israel's ties with South Sudan today [where the Jewish state has armed its repressive government] prove that such relations continue to exist. To ensure that it will not happen again, and for the sake of historical justice, it must be revealed. That is important not only because of the past, but also for the future."

Daniel now spends his time talking to Jewish and Arab school students about Israel's real role in the world and its connection to the occupation of Palestinian territory. "I say that the Israeli citizens aren't getting the proceeds of these [arms] deals," he said. "It's going to arms dealers. You're making deals with bullies of the world. The marketing advantage that Israeli firms use is that we're selling battle-tested equipment from the

occupied [Palestinian] territories. The driving forces of this [defense] industry is that they want the conflict with the Palestinians to go forever. Moral considerations are never considered when Israel aids dictatorships. It's about money and being a powerful nation."

Since becoming more aware of Israel's complicity with his father's murderers, Daniel has continued his political journey down the road of political leftism, but it is a shrinking minority in Israel. When he spoke at a school in a small Arab village to a group of young teens, they appreciated the fact that Chile has the largest Palestinian community outside the Arab world and that Jews and Palestinians have mostly good relations there.[12] "The Jewish students [I speak to] think that they live in a completely democratic country," he said. "Arab students know that they're discriminated against and that they're second-class citizens."

"We always hear here that we're the only democracy in the Middle East," Daniel said. "But you drive a few miles down the road and Palestinians don't have the same rights. We sell ourselves a picture of what we want to see. We are the most moral army in the world, many Israelis still say today, which is laughable."

The history of Zionist militarism and the building of a viable, local defense sector began even before the establishment of Israel. The Jewish state and its backers quickly saw the potential of both developing weapons for their own benefits and then selling and promoting them to a global market. The Palestine laboratory was born.

The birth of Israel in 1948 was a miracle for many Jews around the world but a catastrophe for the Palestinian population. On May 14, 1948, Jewish Agency Chairman David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel, the first in two thousand years. The US government recognized its legitimacy on the same day; but Washington's backing for Israel was not benevolent. To understand the thinking at the time, the essay by George Biddle, a friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, published in the *Atlantic* in 1949 after his visit to the new nation, is instructive. Biddle was unequivocal in his endorsement of Israel, arguing that Western interests in the Middle East would be assured if the Jewish state was in its orbit. He did not seem to like Jews much, writing that they used to be "grease-spotted" and "moth-eaten." But after arriving in Israel they suddenly acquired "physical beauty, healthy vitality, politeness, good nature" and

were akin to US president, founding father, and slave owner Thomas Jefferson.[13] Biddle dismissed the Arabs he saw but thought they were "about as dangerous as so many North American Indians." Not being white, they were "foul, diseased, smelling, rotting, and pullulating with vermin."[14]

The extent of the carnage inflicted on the Palestinian population was incalculable. Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 civilians out of a population of 1.9 million were forcibly expelled and made refugees beyond the borders of the new state. Palestinians call it the Nakba, the catastrophe. Over seven months, 531 villages were destroyed and 15,000 people were killed. The remaining Palestinians suffered beatings, rape, and internment.

The myth of an oppressed people surviving in a tough world goes a long way to explaining Israel's defense policy. The lack of accountability for Israeli actions in 1948 strengthens successive Israeli political and military elites into believing that the tools of colonization and occupation are attractive to a global audience because few nations or international bodies have seriously tried to reckon with the injustices caused then or after the Six-Day War in 1967.

The ghosts of 1948 resonate into the twenty-first century. Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, when assuming the title in 2022, temporarily moved into a house in Jerusalem that was owned by Palestinians in 1948 before they were forced to flee.

By the mid-1930s, new arrivals from Germany and Austria had helped industrialize the cities in Palestine. And here weapons, made by local plants, were a key part of the arsenal that Zionists built or stole for the coming conflict with the British Mandate.[15] Tens of thousands of Jews received military training by the British after 1939 and this proved invaluable when Jews wanted to establish their own nation after World War II.[16] The sheer number of Jews who arrived in Palestine after the war, including men who had spent years fighting the Nazis, meant that Zionists could effectively battle both the British and Arabs.

From the mid-1950s, Israel, having developed a viable defense sector, started to sell its deadly wares beyond its borders. Years later, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion stressed that Israel would "sell arms to foreign countries in all cases in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has no objection." The 1950s saw the development of government-owned defense companies, and privately owned entities grew in the 1960s, including Elbit,

the biggest private arms manufacturer in Israel today. Established in 1966, it quickly became an essential supplier of equipment for Israeli tanks and aircraft. Years later it had become a major exporter of weapons to both democracies and despots, working closely with the US military and a host of other nations to develop a range of equipment, from drones to night vision googles and land surveillance systems to deadly high-tech munitions. Elbit is still today intimately tied to the Israeli security establishment, and has even moved into the book publishing industry.[17]

In 1967 Israel's rapid takeover of the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights set the country on a military path that has never stopped. This victory allowed for the building of both the equipment to control the Palestinian population and then finding willing export markets for it. The Jewish state did not have to look far for interested nations, most of which were dictatorships such as Iran under the repressive Shah and apartheid South Africa.

By the mid-1980s, Israel had been occupying East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights for nearly twenty years. Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* bureau chief in Jerusalem between 1984 and 1988, published a major story in 1986 with the headline, "How Israel's Economy Got Hooked on Selling Arms Abroad." Friedman's piece had its limitations—for example, not once mentioning the Israeli occupation of Palestine or even the word "Palestinian"—but its central thesis was accurate: "Israel, with only 4 million people, has become one of the top ten arms exporters in the world and Israeli businessmen are among the world's leading arms merchants."[18] I can't recall many other articles before or since in the *New York Times* that have come close to explaining the Israeli arms trade and its support of autocracies in such matter-of-fact ways.

Friedman articulated the apparently contradictory feelings within Israel between opponents of the arms trade and believers in its necessity:

> The idea that the Jewish state should be so dependent on weapons sales for its economic or diplomatic survival is profoundly troubling to some people here, clashing with both their self-image and their vision of the Zionist utopia. But many others, the so-called "realists," counter that arms sales are a fact of life for all nation-states, but especially for an Israeli society that has always lived close to the edge. If Israel did not sell arms, others would, and Jerusalem would be deprived of the economic and strategic benefits such sales bring, without having changed the world a whit. Anyway, the realists argue, survival is as much a moral imperative as nonviolence: better a tarnished utopia than a dead dream.

It is not entirely clear that enough Israelis have ever really opposed the defense industry. Perhaps Friedman exaggerated the proportion of the so-called idealists to indicate that some in the Jewish state were appalled by the idea of once-persecuted Jews now working hand in hand with persecutors around the world. Friedman quoted figures suggesting that around 10 percent of the Israeli workforce, 140,000 people, were involved in the arms trade.[19]

Three years before Friedman's article, a piece appeared in the *New York Times* that undercut his wishful thinking about the Israeli public. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi was an Israeli professor of psychology at the University of Haifa who explained that "what others regard as 'dirty work' [colluding with dictatorships], Israelis regard as defensible duty and even, in some cases, an exalted calling. There is virtually no Israeli opposition to this global adventurism … The role of regional and global policeman is something that many Israelis find attractive, and they are ready to go on with the job for which they expect to be handsomely rewarded."[20]

Friedman's piece included this key line from David Ivri, the director general of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, who said that the Israeli arms and security industry could compete in a global market against bigger nations because "state of the art technology" was "tested in battle by the Israeli army." The Palestine laboratory has been state policy for nearly as long as Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory.

Friedman's story ends with what reads like a promotion of Israeli companies led by former commanders of Israel's counter-terror unit selling self-defense courses for companies and individuals who wanted to learn "Israel's expertise in all aspects of self-defense, industrial security and counter-terrorism—an expertise they themselves helped to develop." Left unsaid was that these men gained this knowledge by ruling over the Palestinian population for decades. Instead, Friedman quoted one of the companies, Tour and Secure, and its brochure in celebrating more than forty years of "fighting terror."

Israel sold defense equipment to disreputable regimes from the outset. These states include Burma in the 1950s in its war against a communist insurgency. Its most successful early weapon was the Uzi gun, first designed in the late 1940s shortly after the birth of Israel. It has sold Uzis in

more than ninety countries and they're featured in the militaries of Sri Lanka, Rhodesia [today's Zimbabwe], Belgium, and Germany.

This was all possible because Ben-Gurion recognized in the early years of the nation that building an arms production industry would be beneficial for the Jewish state. The massive amounts of reparations given to Israel from West Germany in 1952 provided the investment resources the sector needed, and Israel transferred much of it secretly into weapons development and the research to develop a viable nuclear weapon. Huge amounts of aid from France and the US combined with German reparations to make the defense industry Israel's leading export business.

Israel's relative isolation in the Middle East, surrounded by what it perceived as enemies, forced the country to develop indigenous weapons. Major global powers, particularly France between 1956 and 1967 and then the US after the 1967 Six-Day War, were the Jewish state's biggest military backers. Militarism became the country's guiding principle and it's lived with it ever since; ending the conflict with the Palestinians is bad for business and might undermine the country's founding ideology. The Cold War saw a litany of proxy wars where the US backed Israel and the Soviet Union supported Syria and Egypt. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote in 1981 that "Israelis complain that in criticizing Israeli's hawkish policies, the US overlooks the fact that Israel has served as a kind of 'combat laboratory' for US weapons development."[21]

The centrality of Israeli arms to the country's economic survival is impossible to over-estimate. "The economy abandoned oranges for hand grenades," writes researcher Haim Bresheeth-Žabner in *An Army Like No Other: How the Israel Defense Forces Made a Natio*n.[22] Exact figures are impossible to obtain, since the state never releases them, but today there are over three hundred multinational companies and six thousand start-ups that employ hundreds of thousands of people. Sales are booming, with defense exports reaching an all-time high in 2021 of US$11.3 billion, having risen 55 percent in two years. Israel's cybersecurity firms are also soaring, with US$8.8 billion raised in one hundred deals in 2021. In the same year, Israeli cyber companies took in 40 percent of the world's funding in the sector.

From an Israeli perspective, the Palestine laboratory has had few downsides. Israel has worked closely with Washington for decades, often operating in places where the US preferred covert support rather than public

backing. For example, Israel supported the police forces of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rice during the Cold War when the US Congress had blocked US agencies from officially doing so.

Both Israel and the US trained and armed death squads in Colombia well into the 2000s. The former drug trafficker Carlos Castaño, who ran a far-right paramilitary force, explains in his ghost-written autobiography, "I learned an infinite amount of things in Israel [in the 1980s], and to that country I owe part of my essence, my human and military achievements. I copied the concept of paramilitary forces from the Israelis."[23] He reportedly arrived in Israel in 2004 after fleeing his own country.

Colombia has long been the most significant strategic US ally in the region. A Colombian government-appointed truth commission released its findings in 2022 about the grim realities during the country's civil war between 1958 to 2016. The US was found to have known that its Colombian allies were running death squads and yet Washington's backing increased.

The Global South has been controlled and pacified with (principally) Israeli and US weapons. Neither anti-Semitism nor extremism have been an impediment to collaboration with states that plunder assets or people. Decades after it was first established, this system of collusion is still in operation and working smoothly. Nothing has ever seriously impeded its development, either during the Cold War or post–September 11 environments.

Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack, one of the country's leading advocates for transparency in the country's past and present defense policy, summed up the situation for me:

> Not a lot has changed in Israel's defense sector over the decades. Its interests and carelessness about human rights and lack of accountability are the same. This is a problem because when I'm filing petitions and approaching the Ministry of Defense and officials it's like they're still in the Cold War. There may be a US or UN arms embargo on places but Israel is still involved, such as in South Sudan, Azerbaijan, Myanmar and other places. These issues never change. I'm trying to expose the past. Not only because of the cliche that history is repeating but because Israel is using gag orders and censorship to stop information coming out.

A historical reckoning of Israel's involvement with some of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' most depraved regimes is required. It is a history that is rarely discussed in the public sphere, and many of its

details remain hidden in Israeli archives. Despite Israel claiming that it was an isolated and often boycotted nation, it has had close, covert relations with many states. However, a checkered understanding of Israeli military influence from the 1950s onwards is possible and reveals an opportunistic and amoral foreign policy. In this way, it is not unlike other major powers and their global relations; for example, the US and France often collude with autocrats, but Israel has always claimed to be a noble and unique entity in the world.

Although aiding ethnonationalist regimes was not the sole focus of Israeli foreign policy, countless examples show how other nation's aiming to target one ethnic group over another was a constant feature in the list of states that Israel armed and trained.

The father of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, wrote in his seminal 1896 pamphlet, *The Jewish State*, "There [in Palestine] we shall be a sector of the wall of Europe against Asia, we shall serve as the outpost of civilization against barbarism."[24] Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who led the country between 1999 and 2001, used a metaphor with a similar meaning: Israel is a "villa in the middle of a jungle," arguing that Israel was a civilized nation among Muslim savages in the Middle East.

This language matters because it displays a contempt for non-Jews that is carried into its relations with outsiders. It was common for Jews to be taught at school or in religious education, as I was told at home by my liberal Jewish parents, that Jews are the chosen people and have a unique relationship with God and society. We could and should help others (though there were set limits to this sympathy, namely excluding Palestinians). It is a belief system that allows racial supremacy against non-Jews to thrive and justifies disregard for their lives. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in 2010, referencing the phrase from verses in the Book of Isaiah, that Israel is "a proud people with a magnificent country and one which always aspires to serve as 'light unto the nations.'"

It's an expression that is still regularly used by Zionists in the hope that Israel will be an inspiration to peoples all over the world. During Passover in 2022, editor of the *Times of Israel* David Horovitz wrote that he wished "our leaders be granted the wisdom to safeguard the modern miracle of Israel—to use that compass to ensure Israel's survival and advancement as a thriving Jewish and a democratic country, a true light unto the nations."[25]

What's "good for the Jews" is a common refrain among the Israeli and Jewish Diaspora—and it is used to justify all manner of nefarious collusion with awful regimes. Chaim Herzog, Israel's president between 1983 and 1993, was not embarrassed by this ideology. As he put it, "We must be guided in our [foreign policy] relationships by the one criterion that has guided governments of Israel ever since the establishment of the state: 'Is it good for the Jews?'" As Noam Chomsky commented in his 1983 book, *The Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and Palestinians*, to solely focus on supposed Jewish interests was an "argument [that] rests on consequences for the Jews, not for the conquered population, whose rights and wishes are null—not an untypical stance among liberal Zionists or among Western intellectuals."[26]

Israeli history can be split into two eras: before and after 1967. Before the Six-Day War, Israeli policy was not noble but at least gave the rhetorical impression of (sometimes) opposing repression. Take apartheid South Africa. In 1963, Foreign Minister Golda Meir told the United Nations General Assembly that Israel "naturally opposes policies of apartheid, colonialism and racial or religious discrimination wherever they exist" because Jews understood what it meant to be victims. Israel bonded with newly independent African states, enjoying their postcolonial freedoms, and African nations backed Israel at the UN. Many Israelis then and now viewed their country as a liberation struggle akin to being freed from colonial bondage. They had no time for the view that Zionism was tinged with colonialism.[27]

The Cold War and its changing political winds contributed to Israel's growing position as a military powerhouse. The Jewish state found itself in a unique position after 1967 with combat experience and the occupation of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights. This testing ground of weapons, equipment, and ideology of domination was invaluable against Soviet-supplied weapons and armies and became increasingly distributed across the globe to new found friends. Israel was allied with the US and its various allies from despots to democracies against the Soviet Union and its proxies. From the 1970s to this day, Israel was the trusted sideman of Washington in its goal of maintaining Pax Americana.[28] It was an arrangement that benefited many Western states but less so peoples in Asia, South America, and Africa.

Journalist Sasha Polakow-Suranksy recounts in his book on Israel's secret relationship with apartheid South Africa, *The Unspoken Alliance*, that 1967 saw a watershed in Israel's defense posture. Assisted by Soviet and Arab propaganda, "Israel's image as a state of Holocaust survivors in need of protection gradually deteriorat[ed] into that of an imperialist stooge of the West." Thereafter, many Third World nations turned away from Israel and the "Israeli government abandoned the last vestiges of moral foreign policy in favor of hard-nosed realpolitik." Partnering with the world's most brutal tyrants followed.[29]

Israel's relationship with Iran under the Shah was an early example of siding with an unpleasant regime. Newly declassified documents from Israel's state archives paint a picture of Israel's desperation to maintain relations with a Muslim nation that never officially recognized the Jewish state (though Tehran did so unofficially with a bribe).[30] Israel's founding leader David Ben-Gurion visited Tehran in 1961 and explained why the friendship between Israel and Iran could never become public. "Allow me to keep it a secret between us," he said. "Our relations are like a true love between two people without their getting married. It's preferable that way."

Over the decades the Shah was in power, especially from the 1950s onward, Israel bought a huge amount of Iranian oil while Tehran used Israel as a middleman to sell its oil to other nations. Israel knew that Iran was brutally crushing any opposition to the Shah, including real or imagined communists, and expressed no concern about it.

A report sent by Israel's representative in Iran, Meir Ezri, on May 5, 1965, discussed his meeting with Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Aram. Aram was concerned that Israel's high-profile support for the Shah could impact its relations with the Arab world. Ezri responded, "Israel's general interest in the Middle East is the existence of a sovereign and prosperous Iran headed by the Shah, who is considered a friend of Israel … We do not believe that the Arabs will ever be friends with Iran despite all Iranian efforts. Our friendship obliges us to bring to Iran's attention what we know about the Arab efforts aimed at the most vital Iranian interests."[31]

The exact extent of collaboration between Israel and Iran's feared secret police, the Savak, is unclear. What the documents show are senior Iranian officials requesting that the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] train bodyguards for their use. The Shah wanted to purchase Israeli planes and tanks and the

Israelis were amenable to his request. From the late 1960s there is communication between Iranian and Israelis officials that outlines the negotiations. Between 1968 and 1972, Iran had purchased Israeli mortars, radio equipment, and other defense equipment. Israel trained Iranian police officers on its own territory. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir met the Shah in 1972 and said that the co-operation "between countries that stand against communism should be strengthened: Persia, Israel, Turkey and Ethiopia."

The Iranian people's growing hatred for the Shah was noted by Israeli officials. Regardless, by the late 1970s Israel was adamant that its influence in Iran must not be jeopardized and urged brutal repression as a solution. In 1977, Israel discussed the possibility of assisting Iran with a range of defense equipment, including a surface-to-air missile with the potential of carrying a nuclear warhead. Washington crushed these plans and told Israel that it could sell only smaller arms (though the total weapons sales involving the Shah and Israel were estimated at US$1.2 billion).[32]

On December 30, 1978, Yael Vered, director of the Middle East Department at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sent a telegram within Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Israeli interests would be best served by "extreme toughness by the army and the establishment of a military regime and a real military government. Whether initiated by the army in the form of a military coup or with the Shah through tacit consent on his part."

The arrival in Iran of exiled leader Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1979 was the beginning of the end for the Shah, though Israeli officials wrote privately that they hoped Iran might still need foreign assistance in using the weaponry that had been sold to them if the Americans were kicked out. The overthrow of the Shah and his departure to exile in Egypt in January 1979, mused Pinchas Eliav, director of political research at Israel's Foreign Ministry, was a warning to other Middle East dictatorships. Israel had seen the power of the Iranian masses rise up against an Israeli-backed autocrat and this was "a harbinger of danger to all the regimes in the region, including the radical ones."[33]

The sheer number of dictatorships with whom Israel has had relations is staggering. After a massive purge of communists in Muslim-majority Indonesia in 1965 and 1966, leading to the death of at least half of million

people, Israel (along with the US, Australia, and most Western powers) was keen to deepen ties with the regime of General Suharto, which took full power in 1967. Within a few months of the slaughter, declassified documents show that Mossad knew what had occurred. Nonetheless, Mossad initiated a closer relationship with the dictatorship on a range of commercial projects including beef, corn, oil, and cotton production. It was an entirely secretive relationship, with Israel keen to bolster the Indonesian generals who led the genocide.[34]

Consider Romania under tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu, who ruled from 1965 to 1989. Declassified documents from that time show that Israel knew that Ceausescu had anti-Semitic opinions, but the Jewish state maintained friendly relations with him for decades. A March 30, 1967, telegram from Bucharest by the Israeli ambassador stated that the Romanian leader "saw Israel as a center for rich Jews whose economic abilities and international connections could be of use, including American Jews."[35]

Ceausescu's Romania was the only Eastern European nation to maintain diplomatic ties with Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War and voted for Israel in the United Nations at a time when growing numbers of nations did not. Israeli officials made the assessment that Ceausescu believed that Israel and Jewish money ruled the world and hoped that his relations with Israel might convince Washington to deal with his regime despite being a brutal communist dictatorship. That relationship did not materialize, but Israel never publicly condemned Ceausescu, even when for years he blocked Romanian Holocaust survivors from being able to leave the country, because his diplomatic backing for Israeli actions on the global stage was viewed as paramount.[36]

Another example: Haiti under François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, whose family ruled between 1957 and 1986, received Israel's Uzi machine guns, armored vehicles, and devices for placing weapons systems on aircraft. The Duvalier dynasty killed between 30,000 and 60,000 people, but despite this, to curry favor with Papa Doc, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a book by him translated. On one of the first pages, under a picture of Papa Doc, was the caption, "Haitian President for the rest of his life." As a reward, Haiti strongly supported Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War.

Israeli lawyer Eitay Mack and Israeli human rights activists filed a freedom of information request in Israel in 2019 to gain documents from the Ministry of Defense about its relationship with Haiti under Duvalier, but their request was denied by the court. Tel Aviv District Court Judge Hagai Brenner, in rejecting the request in February 2021, claimed that releasing the documents could "greatly embarrass the state."

The original documents contained racist and derogatory language by Israeli officials toward Haitians, mocking their poverty and skin color, and so Judge Brenner claimed that this was a reason not to allow them into the public realm. Files, she wrote, which "include the use of insulting terminology that was accepted about fifty years ago and which today is perceived in a particularly negative light may damage the country's image and foreign relations." Brenner also worried that allowing the documents to be made public might assist the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel.

In the aftermath of the 1967 war, Israel hatched a deal with Paraguay, then a dictatorship that provided a home to Nazi war criminals, including Dr. Josef Mengele, the so-called "Angel of Death" who experimented on and butchered hundreds of Jews in Auschwitz. The proposed deal involved paying sixty thousand Palestinians in Gaza, around 10 percent of its entire population, to move to Paraguay with citizenship assured within five years. A leaked Israeli cabinet document included Mossad chief Zvi Zamir claiming that Paraguay was open to taking "60,000 Muslim Arabs who are not communists, according to their definition."[37] The plan never materialized and only thirty Palestinians in total emigrated.

There was a reported connection between the botched plan and Israel's decision in 1969 to stop searching for Nazis in South America, a devil's pact suggesting that the highest levels of the Israeli government preferred expelling Palestinians to finding killers of Jews.

The late 1960s saw a revolution in how Israel viewed potential friends, partners, and enemies. Not because Israel was an enlightened nation before then, but because from 1967 on the thrust of Israel's relations with the world was stripped of any illusions of principle and based solely on finding ways to get support for its then new control of more Palestinian territory and people.

The logic of despots is not hard to understand: the desire to continue indefinite rule. From the 1970s, Israel has been a reliable partner of dictatorships for a range of key reasons. Many regimes, then and now, believe that a partnership with Israel will bring closer ties with Washington and the influential American Jewish community.

The brutal Somoza family ruled Nicaragua from 1936 until 1979, and Israel armed the regime until the very end. When the Sandinistas assumed control in the 1980s, and US President Ronald Reagan unleashed a campaign of terror in Central America in his war against communism, Israel was asked to take a much larger role in the region and join the US in its campaign against the Sandinistas. American Jewish groups, some with ties to the Somoza era, spread falsehoods about supposed anti-Semitism in Nicaragua that led to even greater US and Israeli backing for the brutal Contras. Some of the AK-47 rifles Israel sent to the Contras in the 1980s had been confiscated from the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon (after the Israeli invasion in 1982). An NBC report in 1984 featured an interview with a Contra leader who said that "we received some weapons … that [the] Israeli government took from [the] PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] in Lebanon." The story stated that the far-right group used Soviet-made machine guns and that Israel "at Washington's urging has armed a quarter of the rebel army." The CIA was given assistance by Israeli intelligence officers when training the Contras, and the militia was trained by private military firms staffed by reserve and retired Israeli army commandos.[38]

With Reagan's war on communism, and Washington's partnering with right-wing death squads from Nicaragua to Honduras and El Salvador to Panama,[39] Israel's role was viewed as indispensable in providing both weapons and on-the-ground experience. The Jewish state's role in the Intra-Contra affair, when the US and Israel facilitated weapons sales to Iran to fund the Contras in Nicaragua between 1985 and 1987, was another cynical exercise by both states to fund a nation they knew was repressive but viewed as desirable to support in its war with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. The resulting "Iran-Contra affair" formally severed any further co-operation between Israel and Iran, and today Tehran is the Jewish state's primary enemy in the Middle East.

It had been a familiar story across the region from the 1970s, with Israel keen to partner with states such as Argentina, which under Juan Perón had

welcomed many high-profile Nazis—even including Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann. Argentina was a military dictatorship from 1976 until the regime's collapse in 1983, during which time around thirty thousand Argentinians were murdered or disappeared. The military junta tortured Jews in its prisons, and declassified documents show that Israel did not seem to care.[40]

Israel knew about the repression from the beginning, but did not express any opposition because it viewed its agenda of getting Argentinian support for its West Bank occupation as more important. It claimed that weapons sales to the junta would help Argentinian Jews, but this was a feeble excuse. Blatant anti-Semitism was ubiquitous across Argentina, special torture techniques were reserved for Jewish women, and Argentinian concentration camps were filled with pictures of Hitler and Nazi emblems.[41]

An Israeli academic and independent journalist, John Brown, has uncovered the real relationship between Israel and Argentina during these years. Brown [not his real name] was inspired by the US abolitionist of the 1800s. He was born in Buenos Aires in 1978 during the height of the junta's brutality. A left-wing Jew, Brown uncovered documents about how the government was "killing lots of Jews, basically a Nazi regime." He told me that "Israel used the IDF name and its training in order to get diplomatic benefits."

Israel was aware of the risks of international isolation due to its occupation policies. In 1985, a former head of the Knesset foreign relations committee, Yohanah Ramati, gave a speech at Florida International University that was brutally honest about his country's calculations:

> Israel is a pariah state. When people ask us for something, we cannot afford to ask questions about ideology. The only type of regime that Israel would not aid would be one that is anti-American. Also, if we can aid a country that it may be inconvenient for the US to help, we would be cutting off our nose to spite our face not to.[42]

It was clearly Israel's desire to be a willing participant in Washington's domineering goals in Central America in the 1980s. An Israeli minister of economy, Yaakov Meridor, said in the early years of the decade that Israel wanted to be a proxy for US interests where the global superpower was not able or willing to sell weapons directly. "We will say to the Americans: Don't compete with us in Taiwan; don't compete with us in South Africa;

don’t compete with us in the Caribbean or in other places where you cannot sell arms directly. Let us do it … Israel will be your intermediary.”[43]

In 1983, the *New York Post* reported that an agreement had been signed between the Mossad and CIA to work on joint operations in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Central America, and Africa, a key aim of which was to counter Soviet influence. As a reward, Israel gained much more information from the vast US surveil-lance apparatus on troop movements in the Middle East.[44]

This realpolitik was on full display in Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s as Israel and the US provided military, diplomatic, and ideological cover for a genocidal regime. The CIA had backed a coup in Guatemala in 1954, after which the country saw decades of violence and right-wing regimes. “Pacification” of the countryside was a key aim in these years, along with building “model villages” where Indigenous peoples were forced to live. Around 200,000 people were killed during the country’s civil war between 1960 and 1996.

One of the most effective ways that Israel assisted the Guatemalan regime was the installation of a computer listening center by the private Israeli company Tadiran Israel Electronics Industries. It became operational in late 1979 or early 1980 and housed the names of at least 80 percent of the population. The Israeli media reported that the aim was to “follow up the guerrilla movements in the capital,” and there were allegations that the facility was connected to the US Army’s Southern Command at Fort Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone. It was a highly sophisticated machine for its time and could detect changes in the use of power or water in private homes and therefore note anti-government activity if a printing press was in use.[45] In 2008 Tadiran was merged with Israel’s biggest defense company, Elbit Systems.

Israel’s marriage with Guatemalan tyranny was cemented with the elevation of President Efrain Ríos Montt, who ruled between 1982 and 1983 and committed mass violence against the Indigenous Maya population, possibly killing up to 75,000 people. Israel’s involvement was not hidden. The Israeli media reported when Ríos Montt carried out a coup on March 23, 1982 that Israeli military advisors had assisted in the operation. Ríos Montt told an ABC reporter that the coup was a smashing success “because many of our soldiers were trained by the Israelis.”[46]

Declassified documents show that Israel hoped that its strong support for Montt might generate support for its occupation of the West Bank and lead him to move Guatemala's embassy to Jerusalem.[47] Montt was found guilty of genocide in a Guatemalan court in 2013, the first time a former head of state was tried for these crimes in his own country, and was sentenced to eighty years in jail. After years of legal wrangling, a retrial was underway in 2018 when Montt died at age ninety-one.

Israel and Guatemala bonded on a shared love of counterinsurgency. For the Jewish state, it was years of battling Palestinian resistance to its occupation while Ríos Montt unleashed a war against the Mayan Indians. Israel was keen to offer advice, military equipment, and training. *CBS Evening News* with Dan Rather explained in 1983 that Israel's prowess in Guatemala was "tried and tested on the West Bank and Gaza, designed simply to beat the guerrilla." One Israeli advisor in Guatemala, Lieutenant Colonel Amatzia Shuali, had clearly taken the Israeli government's message to heart: "I don't care what the Gentiles do with the arms. The main thing is that the Jews profit."[48]

The heart of Ríos Montt's strategy to destroy the Mayan Indians was to deem them no better than the Palestinians and treated them accordingly. Some domestic supporters of the Guatemalan junta alleged that there was a "Palestinianization" of the Indigenous population and they had to turn peasant against peasant by forming militias to detect supposed revolutionary activities. It was a recipe for inter-communal tension and violence, and Indians were forcibly displaced, disappeared, tortured, and killed.

The most notorious massacre occurred at the small village of Dos Erres on December 6, 1982, where around three hundred people were slaughtered. The brutality was shocking. Skulls were smashed with sledgehammers and bodies were thrown down a well. Israel had played its part in the Dos Erres massacre. The 1999 UN Truth Commission, after visiting the area to exhume the bodies, detailed in its forensics report that "all the ballistic evidence recovered corresponded to bullet fragments from firearms and pods of Galil rifles, made in Israel."[49]

Getting justice for the victims is an ongoing struggle. In Israel in 2019, lawyer Eitay Mack began a legal campaign to force the Defense Ministry to

come clean on its involvement in the Guatemalan genocide. At the time of writing, no documents have been released to the public.

In 1982, Israel was involved in its own military misadventures and massacres in neighboring Lebanon, which served as a warning on the limits of Israeli power. However, these campaigns were an effective marketing tool for its equipment. This was an apparent contradiction but it played out similarly to other nations with large defense industries. Washington hasn't won a major conflict since World War II and yet its defense sector is the biggest and most profitable in the world. Failure and defeat in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan has not taken a toll on owning 37 percent of the global share of arms between 2015 and 2020, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Israel claimed to have invaded Lebanon to root out the PLO, only withdrawing in 2000, and it was a central player in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. Between 1975 and 1990, an estimated 200,000 people were killed in the Lebanese civil war, with 17,000 more missing. "We arrested countless people [Palestinians] for no reason," said Israeli Haim Rubovitch, who was then a junior case officer in the country and rose to become the internal security service Shin Bet's number three.[50]

War crimes during this time were par for the course. The former IDF chief of staff, Mordechai Gur, stated proudly in a 1978 media interview that targeting civilians was acceptable. The interviewer asked Gur if the IDF bombed people "without distinction." He responded: "After the massacre at Avivnim [a bombing on an Israeli bus in 1970 near the Lebanese border that killed twelve civilians including nine children], I had four villages in South Lebanon bombed without authorization." The interviewer asked: "Without making distinctions between civilians and noncivilians?" "What distinction?" Gur answered.[51]

Israel's defense innovations in Lebanon were noted by the CIA in a partially declassified document from 1986. The US noted the advanced Israeli use of drones, or "remotely piloted vehicles," alongside manned aircraft and the destruction of Syrian assets in the Bekaa Valley (Israel destroyed the Syrian surface-to-air missile system there in 1982). While the US had deployed an early version of drones for reconnaissance in the Vietnam War, the CIA was impressed with the Israeli know-how and

development of the technology. Its report stated that nations such as Pakistan, India, Syria, and South Korea were keen on buying them.

Nonetheless, Washington was worried that its "security interests" in the Third World could be diminished by the mid-1990s because of the "enhanced surveillance capabilities" of the then new drones if they proliferated. Although the CIA believed that drones "may help prevent conflict and maintain stability in tense Middle East and Asian areas," the US was concerned that "terrorists" could use them for suicide missions against US interests.[52]

There are known and unknown horrors caused by Israel in Lebanon during these years. The most notorious is the massacre in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982 carried out by the Israeli-backed Phalange militia.[53] Up to 3,500 civilians were murdered. Israel's then defense minister, Ariel Sharon, was later found indirectly responsible for the bloodshed by Israel's Kahan Commission, though he never paid a serious price for his actions.

Then there are the less publicized horrors including the torture prison at Khiam run by Israel's proxy, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), the IDF, and Shin Bet between 1985 and 2000. Some five thousand prisoners passed through the former French army barracks. One of the survivors, Amine, told *Al Jazeera English* in 2017 that "prisoners were kept naked and splashed with hot and cold water, and subjected to electric shocks. They then had salt put in their wounds."[54]

The IDF paid interrogators and guards at the facility, provided weapons to the SLA, and trained the men in torture techniques. Israel bombed the center during the 2006 war with Hizbollah, destroying much of the remaining evidence. Lawyer Eitay Mack submitted a freedom of information request to the IDF in April 2020 for details about his country's role in the prison. Declassified documents released in 2022 confirmed the indefinite detention of detainees, a lack of enough food, and mistreatment. One document stipulated that the Shin Bet "must make decisions that will reduce responsibility, both ours [Israel] and those of [redacted] regarding keeping the detainees in prison."[55]

Mack was also behind a petition filed in the Israeli High Court in October 2020 for more evidence of Mossad's support for the brutal Christian militias in Lebanon, who killed thousands of Palestinians between

1975 and 1982, including at Tel al-Zataar in August 1976 where up to three thousand Palestinians, mostly civilians, were massacred during a siege that lasted several weeks.

The reason behind Israel's engagement with Lebanon was justified at the time as based on national security grounds, with other nations admiring the Jewish state's actions and wanting to learn from them, but there was something more existential at work. In his 1998 book on the Middle East, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, the *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman gave an anecdote from 1982 about the real, less acknowledged mission of Israeli forces:

> Two targets in particular seemed to interest [Ariel] Sharon's army. One was the PLO Research Center. There were no guns at the PLO Research Center, no ammunition and no fighters. But there was something more dangerous—books about Palestine, old records and land deeds belonging to Palestinian families, photographs about Arab life in Palestine, historical archives about the Arab life in Palestine and, most important, maps—maps of pre-1948 Palestine with every Arab village on it before the state of Israel came into being and erased many of them. The Research Center was like an ark containing the Palestinians' heritage—some of their credentials as a nation. In a certain sense, this is what Sharon most wanted to take home from Beirut. You could read it in the graffiti the Israeli boys left behind on the Research Center walls: [/block]*Palestinians? What's that?*[block] And [/block]*Palestinians, fuck you*[block], and [/block]*Arafat, I will hump your mother*[block]. (The PLO later forced Israel to return the entire archive as part of a November 1983 prisoner exchange.)[56]

It is not hard to see why this attitude was and remains so appealing to some governments. It is a desire to militarily destroy an opponent but also erase its history and ability to remember what has been lost. When surveillance technology is added to the mix, tested on unwilling subjects, it's even harder to successfully resist.

2

September 11 Was Good for Business

Israelis don't wake up in the morning thinking about the conflict.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, September 2021

At the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, Israel's external defense posture did not fundamentally shift. Its support of despotism, while supplementing or at times replacing American largesse globally, remained undiminished. While the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the strategic calculations of Israel's political and media elites, there was now only one undisputed global superpower, the United States. Furthermore, its arms industry had become addicted to the never-ending cash cow of autocracies needing armaments. "The whole culture of security has turned the Israeli establishment into a state within a state," one of Israeli's leading defense journalists, Yossi Melman, told me. What he means is that weapons dealers called the shots.

However, from the 1990s onward Israel moved to become more militarily autonomous from Washington after it found itself at the mercy of around forty-two Iraqi Scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War. The US did not help Israel during these attacks, and its failure to do so left many Israelis upset that the George H. W. Bush administration had apparently abandoned its closest ally in the Middle East.

Thus the Israeli government embraced an increasingly privatized state while shedding many of the nation's socialist roots. Until the 2000s, most Israeli defense companies involved in exports were government-owned.

The high-tech sector was given huge amounts of state support, allowing it to form close ties with American players in the emerging cyber and defense sectors.[1] Israel developed working-class Israeli cities such as Kiryat Gat to become centers of high-tech production.

Israel remains the biggest recipient of US aid, although the Jewish state is now less reliant on that aid than it once was. While this is true financially, it's protected diplomatically by the US from a tsunami of global condemnation after decades of occupation and frequent wars on Gaza. US backing remains vital to Israel's relative strength. Nonetheless, in 1981 US aid was equivalent to roughly 10 percent of Israel's economy, but by 2020, at close to US$4 billion annually, it was down to around 1 percent.[2] For this reason, Israel cares far less about even the mildest American pressure to curtail illegal Jewish colonies in the West Bank, attacks on Gaza, or house demolitions in East Jerusalem.[3]

Whereas in the years after the Six-Day War, Israel faced a barrage of international criticism for its colonization policies, the twenty-first century has seen a growing alliance between Israel and many Arab states, and between nations in Africa and Latin America. Israel now produces most of its own missile defense technology. Global isolation never happened, despite the fears (and wishes) of some that it might. According to Israeli polling, a majority of its Jewish citizens do not overly worry about solving the conflict with the Palestinians, nor do they fear isolation. The status quo suits them just fine.[4]

The end of the Cold War did not see any less Israeli collusion with violent autocracies. Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack is trying to find out what role, if any, the Jewish state played in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. There is a long history of Israel knowing and ignoring Hutu massacres of Tutsi as far back at the 1960s. Evidence indicates that Israel continued sending weapons such as grenades, guns, and ammunition even when the genocide had started on April 6, 1994. Between 800,000 and 1 million Rwandans were massacred in the next one hundred days.

Mack filed a petition in the Israeli High Court in May 2020 demanding that the government open a criminal investigation into both the arms dealers and government officials who aided and abetted the Rwandan crimes against humanity. He even had a video interview with the pilot who flew the weapons into Rwanda, but this evidence was dismissed by the court on

national security grounds. Israel was not alone in being an accomplice in the genocide; the Rwandan army was armed with French weaponry and Paris was a close ally of those perpetrating atrocities.

Exporting Israeli expertise never stopped in the 1990s, and the country's pariah status among some nations, long established after decades of occupation, started to recede during the heady days of the Oslo peace process when it was (wrongly) presumed that the conflict was coming to an end.

The infamous Israeli-made Galil rifles, once used in the Guatemalan genocide, ended up with Colombian drug lords in the late 1980s. Made by Israel Military Industries, taken over by Elbit Systems in 2018, the weapons were part of a much larger Israeli presence in Colombia. An American investigator, E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., told the *Washington Post* in 1990 that the Israeli government should have been more aware of how so many of its weapons ended up in Colombia. "One would have hoped it would have caused [the government of Israel] to ask questions, unless that is the way business is usually done," he said.[5]

American and Colombian investigators discovered that the weapons were part of a murky deal between Israeli mercenaries and Medellín cocaine cartel head José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha when he wanted to take over the country and build a neofascist state.[6] Wanting Israelis to help him with this project made sense, considering the sort of work elements of the Israeli military had done in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.

Decades later, Colombian elites remained in thrall to Israel. A WikiLeaks-released State Department cable from the US Embassy in Bogota in 2009 revealed the presence of Israeli company Global Comprehensive Security Transformation (Global CST), founded by Major General (Res.) Israel Ziv, a former head of the Operations Directorate of the IDF. The firm was contracted to assist the Colombian military in its war against the FARC rebel group. The cable was scathing:

> Over a three-year period, Ziv worked his way into the confidence of former [Colombian] Defense Minister [Juan Manuel] Santos by promising a cheaper version of USG [US government] assistance without our strings attached. We and the GOC [government of Colombia] learned that Global CST had no Latin American experience and that its proposals seem designed more to support Israeli equipment and services sales than to meet in-country needs."

In a promotional video for Global CST in 2011, made when he was president of Colombia, Santos praised the company as “people with a lot of experience.” Santos told an Israeli TV program that he was excited about the Israeli trainers used by the firm: “We’ve [Colombians] even been accused of being the Israelites of Latin America, which personally makes me feel really proud.” The show mentioned Colombia’s 2008 raid into Ecuador and killing of FARC’s second-in-command Paul Reyes. The narrator praised the mission: “All of a sudden, the methods that proved efficient in Nablus and Hebron begin speaking Spanish.”[7]

The US Treasury under the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Ziv in 2018 for supplying weapons and ammunition to both the South Sudanese government and opposition, a nation at war since 2013. Ziv denied that he was an arms dealer by claiming he had helped the poor nation with its agricultural needs. The US lifted its sanctions in February 2020 without giving a reason. A United Nations report in 2015 confirmed that Israeli weapons were fueling South Sudan’s civil war.

The September 11, 2001, terror attacks on New York and Washington turbocharged Israel’s defense sector and internationalized the war on terror that the Jewish state had been fighting for decades. On the night of the attack, former Prime Minister Netanyahu was asked on American TV what the attacks had meant for relations between the two nations. “It’s very good,” he immediately said. He quickly corrected himself: “Well, not very good, but it will generate immediate sympathy.” He thought that the assault might “strengthen the bond between our two peoples, because we’ve experienced terror over so many decades, but the United States has now experienced a massive hemorrhaging of terror.”[8] Seven years later, in April 2008, Netanyahu gave a speech at Israel’s Bar Ilan University and reiterated the same message. “We are benefiting from one thing, and that is the attack on the Twin Towers and Pentagon, and the American struggle in Iraq,” he said. These events had “swung American public opinion in our favor.”[9]

Netanyahu was only partly right because he likely did not consider, or even care, that the Western public might become increasingly repulsed by indefinite occupation. Still, by 2004 Israel’s economy had recovered from the dot-com crash of 2000 and the Palestinian Intifada, which had scared away international investors. For years Israeli companies did not bother

holding their annual meetings in Israel because so few foreigners showed up.

But Israel had products that the world wanted. Its arms industry fully embraced the homeland security sector, bringing in billions of dollars in revenue for missiles, drones, and surveillance equipment. The message was unambiguous: "We have been fighting a War on Terror since our birth. We'll show you how it's done."[10]

After the 2008 global financial crisis, Israel's resilience in the face of economic collapse was spun into a narrative of unique self-determination. It was best summarized in a 2009 book released by the Council on Foreign Affairs called *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*, written by Dan Senor, a former advisor to the US occupation in Iraq, and his brother-in-law Saul Singer, former editorial page editor of the *Jerusalem Post*. The thesis was that Israel thrived due to a range of factors but principally forced conscription. The IDF was a model for the world, the authors claimed, because of the close relationship between the Israeli government and tech start-ups, the former funding and supporting the latter.[11]

In a 2014 interview, Singer expanded on the book's thesis, explaining that Israel is itself a start-up: "That is an idea that took a lot of drive and risk-taking to turn into a reality." Furthermore, Israel is a "country of [mostly Jewish] immigrants, and immigrants tend to be more driven and willing to take risks."[12] In countless interviews over many years, Singer and Senor spent time talking about "innovation" but little about what was actually being developed to generate the biggest profits: defense companies whose primary aim was to monetize the occupation and sell that experience in controlling another people to a global market.

In one section of *Start-UpNation*, the authors gush over the IDF and American military, believing that both in different ways provide a model for leadership and success, completely ignoring the realities of what these organizations have done in the last decades, particularly in occupying Muslim lands. "While a majority of Israeli entrepreneurs were profoundly influenced by their stint in the IDF," they write, "a military background is hardly common in Silicon Valley or widespread in the senior echelons of corporate America."[13]

The collective belief among Israeli Jews in supporting a Jewish-majority state was supposedly essential for developing world-class weapons and technology. One Israeli entrepreneur, Jon Medved, compared this unfavorably to the US: “When it comes to US military resumes, Silicon Valley is illiterate. What a waste of kick-ass leadership talent coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan.”

This kind of thinking led to more than a decade of Netanyahu pushing for Israel to become one of the world’s leading tech developers, with an expertise on weapons, surveillance and cyber tools. Both the Israeli government and private companies promoted their products as effectively battle-tested on Palestinians. For example, Israeli technology was sold as the solution to unwanted populations at the US–Mexico border where the Israeli company Elbit was a major player in repelling migrants. European governments also wanted to monitor refugees, so Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) drones were employed for the task.

The start-up nation ideology requires constant marketing, however, because the competition is fierce. In 2022 IAI launched an advertising campaign to lure potential new recruits from the often better-paying tech sector. The ads aimed to convince young Israelis that working in the defense sector was the most ethical decision they could make. Not everyone was convinced, with one person tweeting in response: “They [IAI] should have just written: ‘Instead of writing code that will get thousands of people addicted to poker [when working in tech], come work with the IAI and write code that will kill those very same people with guided missiles, drones and smart munitions’.”[14]

“Cyber is a great business,” Netanyahu told Tel-Aviv University’s seventh annual cybersecurity conference in 2017. “It’s growing geometrically because there is never a permanent solution, it’s a never-ending business.” A *Forbes* contributor, Gil Press, who attended the event, later wrote that after briefings from Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs he concluded that the success of Israel’s surging cyber sector was due to massive government support and placing the military as a “start-up incubator and accelerator.” It was taking a large part of the then global US$82 billion cybersecurity industry by often testing new cyber defenses in Israel before making them global. What this meant in practice was that many of the “problems” that Israeli firms were positing would be “solved” by veterans of the IDF.[15]

More than two decades after September 11, 2001, Israel's gamble paid off with surging global interest in its defense and surveillance sectors. In 2020, Israel spent US$22 billion on its military and was the twelfth biggest military supplier in the world, with sales of more than US$345 million.

The world indeed took notice. Global public opinion in the US toward Israel has taken a nosedive since 2001. Liberal and Democratic voters are increasingly skeptical of Israeli actions. Consensus in the Jewish community has become impossible. A survey in 2021 conducted by Jewish Electorate Institute, a group led by leading Jewish Democrats, found that 34 percent of Jews agreed that "Israel's treatment of Palestinians is similar to racism in the United States," 25 percent agreed that "Israel is an apartheid state," and 22 percent agreed that "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians."

A 2022 survey by the major pro-Israel lobby group, the American Jewish Committee, confirmed this trend. Nearly 44 percent of young Jewish Americans didn't feel very connected to Israel and more than one in five millennial American Jews backed one democratic state in Israel and Palestine. Another study in the same year, conducted by Pew Research Center, found that young Americans under the age of thirty viewed both Israelis and Palestinians equally favorably.

Israel's deteriorating image in many Western nations has had little impact on the desire by mainstream Israelis to continue the occupation, the key source of disquiet from London to New York. If anything, it has made Israeli Jews more belligerent and determined to maintain the status quo because there has been virtually no political, military, or diplomatic price for doing so. The post-9/11 war on terror reinforced Israel's decades-long practice of helping other states fight their own battles against unwanted populations. It was done with arguably less embarrassment because now the world's only superpower was doing exactly the same thing, regardless of whether it was led by a Democrat or Republican president.

Israel has thus fully embraced the "war on terror" and richly profited from it. One of the most successful though bloody counterinsurgency battles of the early twenty-first century was the Sri Lankan government's destruction of the Tamil Tigers militant group. Israel played a key, though largely unpublicized, part in Colombo's successful campaign in a civil war that killed and disappeared more than 200,000 people, mostly Tamils, over a

quarter-century that ended in 2009. Israel sold Kfir fighter jets and trained the Special Task Force, a brutal unit of the Sri Lankan police. Sri Lanka borrowed the Israeli playbook during the last stages of the civil war and ignored calls by NGOs, human rights organizations, and foreign governments to cease violence. The military stopped when the Tamil Tigers were completely decimated and Velupillai Prabhakaran, its leader, killed.

Israel also helped generations of Sinhalese politicians build and maintain Sinhalese enclaves in the north and east of Sri Lanka, areas where most Tamils live. The aim was to create buffer zones around Tamil-majority areas and establish an unofficial occupation of Tamil territory. These plans continued after 2009 and Sinhala colonization has never stopped. These ideas were directly taken from Israel's presence in the West Bank, where Palestinian sovereignty is denied with numerous fortified Jewish colonies.[16] Israel signed a US$50 million deal with Sri Lanka in 2021 to upgrade the country's Kfir jets.

While Israel's exact role in the Rwandan genocide remains hidden from public view, the Jewish state was happy to support another regime in its ethnic cleansing. Myanmar was credibly accused by the United Nations in 2018 of committing genocide against the Muslim Rohingya minority: the country's military had used arson, rape, and murder as weapons of war in its brutal campaign. None of this had bothered Israel, and in 2015 a secret delegation from Myanmar visited Israel's defense industries and naval and air bases to negotiate deals for drones, a mobile phone-hacking system, rifles, military training, and warships.[17]

One of the visitors who posted on Facebook after attending Yad Vashem, the country's Holocaust memorial, was Myanmar military chief Min Aung Hlaing. During the visit, he met with then President Reuven Rivlin and the IDF chief of staff. Hlaing was one of six individuals specifically named by a UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar for being the most responsible for human rights abuses. In 2018, Israel signed an education pact with Myanmar that allowed both nations to "cooperate to develop programs for the teaching of the Holocaust and its lessons of the negative consequences of intolerance, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia." Public pressure finally forced the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 2019 to abandon the pact.

Despite an international arms embargo, genocide allegations were no impediment for senior representatives of Myanmar to attend in uniform Israel's biggest weapons and security conference in Tel Aviv in 2019. After a few journalists reported on the visit, also revealing that South Sudanese officials attended, Israel reluctantly agreed that representatives from Myanmar would no longer be allowed to attend Israeli arms fairs while a global weapons embargo was in place.[18]

This messaging did not reach the Israeli ambassador to Myanmar, who posted a tweet, quickly deleted after being reported by *Haaretz* in 2019, in support of the leaders of Myanmar, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who were about to represent their country in a genocide case at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. "Encouragement for a good verdict and good luck!" Ambassador Ronen Gilor tweeted with a link to a story.[19] Days after the February 2021 coup by the junta, Gilor tweeted a photo of two sisters from Myanmar who had won a competition for honey manufacturing. It was later deleted, but this didn't stop him later tweeting: "In this harsh time the man is the world and the man is complex; and yet Myanmar people are beautiful and awesome."[20]

Although Israel claimed to have stopped selling any equipment to Myanmar in 2018, the exact nature or truthfulness of such statements was unclear due to extreme secrecy around weapons dealings in Israel.[21] The ties between the two nations remained strong, with Myanmar's ambassador to Israel being one of the few foreign dignitaries who attended a ceremony in 2017 in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc in the West Bank to commemorate fifty years of Israeli occupation. Myanmar's ambassador to Israel admitted to the Israeli media in 2017 that Israel had imposed no restrictions on the weapons sold to them.[22] Newly declassified Israeli documents show that Israel saw a unique business opportunity in the country since its birth in 1948, selling copious amounts of deadly weapons in exchange for friendly support in international forums. Even during the worst of the country's atrocities against minorities, Israel stepped up its arms sales and training.[23]

It was not until 2019 that Israel finally condemned "the atrocities that took place in the Rakhine region against the Rohingya," but according to Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack, it "likely came from the understanding that Ambassador Gilor's tweet could serve as evidence of

criminal intent (‘*mens rea*’) of senior Israeli Defense and Foreign Ministry officials who approved defense exports to aid and abet Myanmar forces in their crimes.”[24] While many countries called on Myanmar to allow Rohingya refugees to return safely from Bangladeshi refugee camps, Israel refused, likely because it had no intention of allowing Palestinian refugees who were forcibly displaced in 1948 to come back to the state of Israel.[25]

Nothing changed after the political defeat of Netanyahu in 2021 (and his return to the job after re-election in November 2022 will only deepen the trends that he unleashed). While he had undeniably increased Israel’s public backing for dictatorships during his time in office, he was perhaps less embarrassed by the embrace of autocracy than his predecessors, and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was no different. His defense minister, Benny Gantz, visited Singapore in October 2021 for meetings about arms sales. The government tried to force the Israeli press not to report on the trip, more worried about appearances than ceasing weapons deals. Singapore is a one-party state that does not allow free speech. Back in 2019, Gantz had said that Israel should not sell arms to “regimes that commit genocide. [Israel] is a moral nation and a moral country, and we must behave that way in international relations.” Singapore has not killed millions of people, but it’s hardly a model democracy.

Supporting despots is a bipartisan position in Israel. The vice president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, visited Israel in July 2021 and met with the Bennett government. His father, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, is the longest-serving dictator in the world, having ruled his nation with brutality since 1979. His son is his designated successor. During his stay in Israel, he purchased suicide drones from Israeli defense contractors and was given the honor of visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.[26]

The ability to monetize the occupation was turbocharged after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. But the message being sold to willing nations around the world was far more than just supposedly fighting terrorism and destroying its base. According to Scottish sociologist and expert on surveillance studies, David Lyon, it was a wholesale reimagining of what societies would look like in the twenty-first century. The massive growth in the homeland security industry proved that surveillance had

> spilled out of its old nation-state containers to become a feature of everyday life, at work, at home, at play, on the move. So far from the single all-[/block] [block]seeing eye of Big Brother, myriad agencies now trace and track mundane activities for a plethora of purposes. Abstract data, now including video, biometric, and genetic as well as computerized administrative files, are manipulated to produce profiles and risk categories in a liquid, networked system. The point is to plan, predict, and prevent by classifying and assessing those profiles and risks.[27]

Israel was a well-known expert in these matters long before 9/11 but those events helped sell its acumen worldwide. For example, both the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and 2008 Beijing Olympics Games used Israeli companies to secure the events because Israel had positioned itself as the one of the best and more reliable providers of crowd management techniques, command and control rooms, and urban security. Alongside protecting nuclear plants, airport security, and law enforcement, among many other areas where surveillance and tight security were viewed as essential, Israeli expertise or equipment were routinely the answers to almost any security question.

How terrorism was defined, and by whom, was rarely asked in the mainstream media in the decades after 9/11. Israeli “expertise” in fighting terrorism is valued by many states and its patriotic media boosters because public debate around the issue is mostly shallow and the Palestinian cause has been associated with extremism, especially since 9/11. There is an interchangeability between terrorism experts who appear in the media to talk about the never-ending risk from insurgents big and small, deliberately conflating Hamas with Hizbollah, al-Qaeda with ISIS, and the Taliban with the Islamic Republic of Iran as if they are all the same irrational, Jew-hating force to be defeated by military means alone.

It is easy and uncontroversial for the media to book pro-Israel guests to advocate harsh counter-terrorism methods and riskier to feature a critic of these policies or a Muslim or Arab who has experienced it first-hand. The powerful Israel lobby will be happy if the former happens but outraged if the latter occurs, pressuring editors and journalists to think more carefully before hearing them again. Self-censorship then occurs, and I have heard countless instances of it during my twenty years of reporting on Israel/Palestine. The same narrow perspectives that are heard continue to dominate public space.

But it is not just the pro-Zionist lobby at play, despite many editors and journalists taking free trips to Israel sponsored by pro-Israel groups and

being shown a Disney-version of the conflict where Palestinians and Iranians are the bogeymen. There is still a great deal of sympathy for the (usually) more articulate Israeli spokespeople and their ability to couch the wars in Gaza and endless occupation as necessary to survival as a majority Jewish state. Few want to be seen as questioning Israel lest they be (falsely) accused of anti-Semitism, a regularly used smear designed to silence critics. It often works.

Israeli academic Neve Gordon, who teaches international law and human rights at Queen Mary University in London, has a more detailed explanation for Israel's appeal. He left Israel with his partner a few years after publishing an article in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2009 where he accused Israel of being an apartheid state that deserved to be boycotted. In a study on Israel's homeland security boom, published that same year, Gordon placed Israel in the context of a self-described democracy that sold itself as a bastion of freedom (for Jews). Gordon argued that the "Israeli experience in fighting terror is attractive not only because Israelis manage to kill 'terrorists' (the militaristic worldview), but also because killing terrorists is not necessarily adverse to neoliberal economic objectives, and actually advances them."

Israel's supposed belief in democracy, Gordon continued, was unlike neighboring states that never claimed to be democratic.

> This attraction stems from the sense (real or perceived) that fighting terrorism through methods of homeland security, that include suspending due process in many areas of the criminal justice system, including torture, the right to a speedy trial, the freedom from arbitrary police searches, and the prohibition against indefinite incarceration and incognito detentions (to mention a few methods) does not conflict with democratic values. Thus, the ultimate attractiveness towards the Israeli experience in fighting terrorism is to its ability to link a militaristic worldview with a neoliberal economic agenda and a democratic political regime.[28]

And if the fear of terrorism does not sell Israeli militarism, then sexual allure will. The Alpha Gun Girls (AGA) were founded in 2018 by former IDF veteran Orin Julie. A group of scantily-dressed women caressing Israeli military hardware and wearing camouflage, they mirrored a similar gun culture in the US but with a strongly Zionist agenda. Julie's social media posts were peppered with pro-gun rhetoric and lines like this: "No matter how hard it'll be WE WILL DEFEND OUR LAND!" At the 2019 Defense, Homeland Security and Cyber Exhibition (ISDEF) in Tel Aviv, the AGA fondled rifles, posed for photos with the adoring crowd, and passed out

brochures with their Instagram handles listing bust measurements, shoe and clothing size, and number of followers. A long line of people waited to get autographs. The women are regularly seen posing in deserts, their clothes covered in fake blood.[29]

Female models promoting weapons on social media were a new phenomenon in Israel, and Orin Julie believed that she was the first, telling the *Times of Israel* in 2018 that she "really loved Israel" and formed the AGA to promote companies like Elbit and Israel Weapons Industries as an integral part of her Zionism. "Social media and a transnational private defense industry have democratized the lusty aesthetics of warfare," wrote Sophia Goodfriend, a doctoral student in cultural anthropology at Duke University who researched the marketing and production of Israeli surveillance tools, in *Jewish Currents* magazine.[30] "AGA exports Israel's ability to deny violence and normalize occupation by aestheticizing warfare," she continued. "Dressed up in high heels and detachable angel wings, the eroticism of Israeli obfuscation is now a transnational commodity."

Julie received a huge online response, some praising her looks and weapons skills, with others writing that she was a "baby killer," but there is no doubt that sexualizing Israeli weaponry was a brazen way to counter growing online criticism of Israeli occupation policies and a tactic that connects the Jewish state with the huge number of mostly right-wing and pro-Israel American supporters of the National Rifle Association (NRA).

This was Zionism as objectified sex object, not a huge stretch from Israel using female soldiers in propaganda in the years after its birth to promote a strong and determined female citizenry. The political agenda wasn't hidden, nor was it always explicit, leaving viewers to believe that nationalism and big guns were essential to maintain the Jewish state. That's undeniably true because without a highly militarized society it would be impossible to sustain more than fifty years of occupation. AGA were trying to depoliticize the occupation by completely ignoring those suffering because of it.

It was inevitable that the Israeli occupation would become increasingly privatized. With so many Israeli companies involved in maintaining the infrastructure around the occupation, these firms found innovative ways to sell their services to the state, test the latest technology on Palestinians, and

then promote them around the world. Israel embraced neoliberalism from the mid-1980s and privatization of major state-owned enterprises accelerated in the 1990s. Nonetheless, while the defense industries are increasingly in private hands, they continue to act as an extension of Israel's foreign policy agenda, supporting its goals and pro-occupation ideology.

The human cost of the neoliberal shift has been devastating; Israel has the highest income inequality of any nation in the OECD. The poverty rate in 2020 was 23 percent of the Israeli Jewish population and 36 percent of the Arab population.

Outsourcing the occupation takes different forms and includes the Western-backed Palestinian Authority (PA) as a reliable enforcer of the status quo in the West Bank. During the late 2008 and early 2009 Gaza war, the PA brutally suppressed Palestinian protests against the conflict while Israel sent ground troops into Gaza.[31] PA repression against its own people only grew in the following years. It now runs a police state in the West Bank while Hamas rules with brutality in Gaza. The Palestinians have few viable political alternatives.

Many Palestinians are unaware of how the occupation has been privatized because it makes no difference if a state officer or private individual harasses or humiliates them. Neither entity is accountable to those over whom they rule. I saw this constantly when working and traveling across the West Bank beginning in 2005. Many checkpoints through which Palestinians are forced to travel to access their schools, workplaces, or Israel if they are fortunate enough to get one of the few work permits handed out by the Jewish state, use facial recognition technology and biometric details to document their every move.

The aim of new technology to supposedly streamline the process is really to dehumanize it entirely. This often results in no real interaction at all, just a booming voice over a speaker when an Israeli security officer shouts directions at a Palestinian passing through a checkpoint. When, in 2016, privatized security guards killed twenty-four-year-oldMaramSalihAbuIsmail at Qalandia checkpoint alongside her sixteen-year-old brother Ibrahim Taha, nobody was ever held accountable. Israel's shoot-to-kill policy becomes even more widely applied when the so-called security services are outsourced. That is exactly the point, because when an abuse occurs the state blames the private company for the crime.

One Palestinian man told me at Qalandia checkpoint that it made "no difference" if he was stopped by an Israeli official or private security guard for questioning. The end result was the same. Reham, a twenty-two-year-old medical and psychology student at An-Najah University in Nablus, said that it was "miserable" waiting to go through the checkpoint but she was unaware the checkpoints were being increasingly privatized. "It depends on the individual soldier or policeman," she said. "Sometimes they let you go; they don't talk to you. Generally, girls are meaner than boys—I don't know why that is."[32]

According to the United Nations, there are 593 checkpoints and roadblocks across the West Bank impeding Palestinian movement. Of the more than 30 checkpoints that connect Israel with the West Bank and Gaza, more than half have been fully or partially privatized since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005. Some of the Israeli security corporations involved in privatized security work are usually staffed with veterans of the Israeli military. They also operate in West Bank settlements. Private companies include G1 Secure Solutions, Malam Team, Modi'in Ezrachi, and T&M Israel, which are hired by settler organizations.[33] It is an effective model that benefits a range of Israeli players and erases any distinction between Israel proper and the occupied territories.

Because Israeli officials still claim that the occupation is temporary, there has never been a robust discussion within the Jewish state about the creeping privatization of the occupation. The colonization of the West Bank and Gaza is rarely covered in the Israeli media except as a security issue to be managed. Outsourcing has been described by policymakers as "civilianizing the checkpoints" or "autonomy" for Palestinians.[34]

Economic researcher Shir Hever writes in his 2018 book *The Privatisation of Israeli Security* that this process will only become a political problem for the Israeli elites if or when authorities "find themselves unwilling or unable to invest the resources needed to keep the contracts with countless PMSCs [private military and security companies] and arms companies in place … When that moment comes, the core function of the Israeli security elites will be revealed: the occupation and repression of Palestinians."[35]

Although his book goes into detail about Israel's expertise in privatizing and maintaining the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Hever told me

that the Israeli model of control in Palestine was becoming less inspiring for similarly minded leaders around the world. “Authoritarian regimes definitely still want to learn how Israel manages and controls the Palestinians but the more they learn the more they realize that Israel does not actually control the Palestinians very effectively,” he said. “Support for Israel by right-wing groups and politicians around the world is still going strong (see former President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, a particularly depressing example) but I think there is more focus on the racism, racial profiling, nationalism and less and less admiration for the ‘strongest military in the world.’”

Nonetheless, there is every indication that the privatized military-industrial complex will only grow in the coming decades. The accounting firm KPMG released a report in July 2021 that urged investment in the defense sector. Covid-19 had worsened global instability, according to KPMG’s analysis, but instability was good for the defense business: “The world settlement is currently at its most fragile since the Cold War, with the three main players—the US, China and Russia—continuing to spend more on their defense capabilities and so inducing a trickle-down effect onto other nations’ defense expenditure.”[36]

Hever may be right when it comes to more traditional military hardware, but the sale of Israeli drones and cyber technology is booming. Within days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the Israeli press was filled with stories about the prospect of huge orders from Europe of Israeli defense equipment. Israel is not the only nation that provides this technology, but a new Cold War between the West, China, and Russia will strengthen Israel’s hand. In many ways, it does not matter what aspects of the Israeli occupation are appealing—the control of Palestinians, racial profiling, or rampant nationalism—because in the end ethno nationalists will pick and choose what they believe they can learn from the Israeli experience.

Israel’s largely unregulated surveillance industry is leading the world. The 2022 Israeli Defense Exposition in Tel Aviv, the country’s largest arms trade fair, brought twelve thousand people in police forces and militaries from ninety nations, including human rights–abusing states Bahrain, Belarus, the Philippines, Uganda, Morocco, and Nigeria, and artificial intelligence–led surveillance tools were prominently on show.[37] Senior

members of Israel's defense establishment attended. Many of the products were advertised as increasing convenience for the user, for example, being able to pass a checkpoint in a faster manner, but their true aim was to improve their ability to monitor and target unwanted populations.[38]

Israel was an inevitable beneficiary due to its strong military and close ties with Washington elites. The money will keep on flowing. The world spent almost US$2 trillion on military spending in 2020.[39] The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was US$768 billion, the biggest US defense budget in history, formulated during the Biden administration in September 2021. And according to Joe Roeber of Transparency International, a US official told him in 1997 that the CIA had concluded in a secret mid-1990s report that the weapons industry accounted for 40 to 45 percent of corruption in world trade.[40]

The illusion sold by the KPMG report was that remote killing and the growing investment in drones meant "militaries of the near future will be more remotely driven." It was not explicitly stated, but the clear implication was that arms manufacturers were moving away from the messy and ugly weapons of the past and heading toward a cleaner, and less bloody remote form of warfare.[41]

Meanwhile, privatization of the occupation is gathering speed. AnyVision is an Israeli start-up that secretly monitors Palestinians across the West Bank with a range of cameras, the locations of which are not acknowledged by the company or Israel. Artificial intelligence thus merges with biometrics and facial recognition at dozens of Israeli checkpoints throughout the West Bank. AnyVision claims that its technology does not discriminate on the basis of race or gender and that it creates only "ethical" products. When asked by NBC News in 2019 about its work in the West Bank, CEO Eylon Etshtein initially threatened to sue them, denied there even was an occupation, and accused the NBC reporter of being paid by Palestinian activists.[42] He later apologized for the outburst.

AnyVision is shy about admitting its true role in the West Bank, but digging by NBC News uncovered a project, called Google Ayosh, targeting all Palestinians with the use of big data. AnyVision continues to use the occupation as a vital source to train its systems in the mass surveillance of Palestinians, focusing, it says, on attempts to stop any Palestinian attackers.[43]

AnyVision is a global company that operates in over forty countries, including Russia, China (Hong Kong), and the US, and in countless locations such as casinos, manufacturing, and even fitness centers. The company changed its name to Oosto in late 2021, and raised US$235 million that year to further develop its AI-enabled surveillance tools. The former head of Mossad, Tamir Pardo, is an advisor and it is staffed by Israel's intelligence Unit 8200 veterans. It promotes itself as building a world "safer through visual intelligence."

AnyVision so impressed Microsoft that the Seattle software giant briefly invested US$74 million in the company in 2019 before facing a massive backlash. It cut its ties with AnyVision in 2020 due to pressure from the "Palestinian lobby on the Democratic Party," according to the former head of Israel's Defense Export Control Agency, though it continues to develop its own facial recognition technology.[44] The former Biden administration press secretary Jen Psaki worked for AnyVision as a "crisis communications consultant" and earned at least US$5,000 at some point between leaving the Obama administration in 2017 and starting in the Biden White House.[45]

AnyVision was not the only company implementing such AI technologies. Biometric facial recognition is a growth industry estimated to be worth US$11.6 billion globally by 2026. Cor-sight AI is a part Israeli-owned facial recognition company that works with the notoriously brutal police departments in Mexico and Brazil and the Israeli government.[46] A former Israeli army colonel, Dany Tirza, partnered with Corsight AI to develop a police body camera that could immediately identify an individual in crowds, even if their face was covered, and match the person to photographs from years before. Tirza lives in the illegal West Bank settlement of Kfar Adumim and is one of the key architects of the Israeli separation wall that creeps through the West Bank. He supports facial recognition technology at Israeli checkpoints because it reduces "friction" between the IDF and Palestinians.[47]

The IDF uses extensive facial recognition with a growing network of cameras and mobile phones to document every Palestinian in the West Bank. Starting in 2019, Israeli soldiers used the Blue Wolf app to capture Palestinian faces, which were then compared to a massive database of images dubbed the "Facebook for Palestinians." Soldiers were told to

compete by taking the most photos of Palestinians and the most prolific would win prizes.[48]

The system is most extreme in the city of Hebron, where facial recognition and numerous cameras are used to monitor Palestinians, including at times in their homes, instead of the extreme Jewish settlers living there, who routinely express genocidal threats against the Palestinians. The IDF claimed that the program was designed to "improve the quality of life for the Palestinian population."

In 2022, Israel installed a remote-controlled system for crowd control in Hebron, a tool with the ability to fire tear gas, sponge-tipped bullets, and stun grenades. It was created by the Israeli company Smart Shooter, which claims to successfully use artificial intelligence when finding targets. Smart Shooter is a regular presence on the international defense show circuit and has sold its equipment to more than a dozen countries.

Blue Wolf was a smaller version of the Wolf Pack database, which contained the personal details of virtually every Palestinian in the West Bank, including educational status, photos, security level, and family history. Soldiers in the West Bank were instructed in 2022 to enter the details and photos of at least fifty Palestinians into the Blue Wolf system every shift and were not allowed to end their shift until they did so.[49] There was no security rationale for these actions. This is a similar set-up to what China does against the Uighurs in its Xinjiang province, using surveillance and technology to both track and intimidate the residents, though Beijing receives far more international condemnation than the Jewish state.

Despite the wild claims, the effectiveness of this kind of technology is questionable. Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack told me that firms exaggerate the impact of their products in maintaining the occupation to secure the big dollars. "A big part of the Shin Bet's work [Israel's internal security apparatus, which is integral in enforcing the occupation] is based on surveillance by humans (friends, family, and community members) and not sophisticated technology. There is no way to get information about the specific technology that the Shin Bet is using but it doesn't belong to private companies." In other words, both human and signals intelligence were still invaluable in controlling the movements of an unwanted population, and it is still many years ahead, if ever, until humans will be made redundant.

The Shin Bet, according to *Haaretz* journalist Gideon Levy, revelled in "torturing" Palestinians. "The bulk of the Shin Bet's activity involves sustaining the occupation by means of tyrannical control over an occupied people," he wrote. Reminiscent of the actions of Unit 8200, Levy concluded that the Shin Bet "does not rule out any means, one that tortures people and plays games with their lives, that exploits human weaknesses for its own purposes, that violates every individual right, that does not treat Palestinians as human beings, that snoops after them day and night, raids their homes and bedrooms, including the kids' rooms, knows the color of their underwear; the Shin Bet is the sewage pipe from which the rotten stench of the occupation wafts."[50]

The best-known Israeli lawyer fighting the defense sector is Eitay Mack. A soft-spoken resident and public gadfly who lived for years in Jerusalem, he moved to Norway in 2021. He remains a rare voice in a country that largely ignores Israel's relations with despots. His work also involves representing Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and filing civil lawsuits on their behalf against Israel's security services.

In 2020, he unsuccessfully fought to force Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, to stop inviting war criminals and human rights abusers through its doors. Israel's High Court denied his petition, filed on behalf of Professor Veronica Cohen, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor, and sixty-five others, because it argued that visits by controversial leaders could have "educational value" and it could not intervene in Israeli government diplomacy. Mack wrote it was not by chance that a 2020 event at the facility to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz would have no participants from Africa, East Asia, or Latin America and instead just whites with Judeo-Christian identities.[51]

Mack elicited this extraordinary response from Yad Vashem after the petition was submitted: "The reports and rumors presented throughout the petition concerning the involvement and/or alleged support of foreign officials in serious crimes under international law are not known to Yad Vashem and Yad Vashem cannot in any way corroborate or refute them." A body supposedly dedicated to the study of genocide and mass violence was unable to Google the crimes committed by countless former guests, including Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa against the Tamils or Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines against the poor.[52]

Mack told me that his aim is not to “fix Israel or its image” but “prevent genocide, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights since Israel is complicit in these crimes around the globe.” By focusing globally, he wanted to expose the hypocrisy of Israel trying to silence its critics and “using the anti-Semitic card while for decades Israel has white-washed fascist and anti-Semitic regimes as long as those countries accepted Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.” Having read over 100,000 pages in the Israel State Archives, Mack saw continuity since the early days of the country. “In the past, Israel helped tapping phones and now Israel hacks mobile phones.”

As a white Jewish man, Mack acknowledged his privileged position because he had never been threatened for doing his work (aside from an Israeli woman on the kibbutz Beit Alfa who didn’t like the fact that he was calling out its work producing anti-riot gear.) “It’s a privileged harassment,” he said. “For many Israelis, it’s a problem to say that we’re supporting genocide. They say that they’re defense exporters but they’re arms dealers. I’m getting a lot of support from across the Israeli political spectrum from the far right to the far left. Some say that I’m acting with Jewish morality (though the right don’t consider the occupation of Palestine as a problem).”

Mack is partly referring to settler Eli Yosef, who lives in the Ma’aleh Adumim settlement near Jerusalem. He’s a right-winger who fundamentally opposes Israeli arms sales to dictatorships. As a religious Jew, Yosef told *Haaretz* in 2018 that “we absorbed hatred for 2,000 years, and then we come and arm evildoers? That is something fundamental: If I can’t love, and all that interests me is money and I am ready to sell my soul for money, then it’s all over. It’s spiritual suicide. And that is the prelude to actual suicide. If you think you can sow evil and not reap evil, you must be blind.”[53]

Another opponent of Israel’s sale of weapons to dictators also lives in an illegal settlement. Rabbi Avidan Freedman resides in Efrat, near Bethlehem, and has had contact with Mack. He’s the executive director of Yanshoof, meaning “owl” in Hebrew and an acronym for “arms exports, transparency, and oversight.”

“The state says it doesn’t sell weapons to dictatorships,” Freedman told *Haaretz*. “Small sales to African dictatorships are occasionally barred. But I’m not willing to accept the existing situation. That is, I share in the responsibility for these actions as an Israeli citizen. We share in the guilt

and the responsibility for the actions—and on top of that, young people who served in elite units train forces in problematic countries. That's moral corruption that rebounds on us in all sorts of ways."[54]

Mack is a tireless advocate for the victims of Israel's defense policies. He led the campaign in 2022 to pressure the Israeli government to arrest the Sudanese General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemeti" Dagolo for his involvement in the genocide in Darfur. Israel had invited Dagolo to visit secretly in 2021 while trying to build relations with the Sudanese dictatorship.

Mack's legal strategy evolved after Israel's Supreme Court decided in June 2021 that it would no longer hear any petitions challenging the country's defense exports except in very extreme circumstances. The judges said that the government could exercise its own judgment about who to sell to.[55] Mack and his colleagues had been trying to stop Israeli company Cellebrite from selling its surveillance equipment to dictatorships such as Russia and China.

The Israeli courts were thus shut off as a viable option, and Mack responded accordingly. "I want to continue as a lawyer without going to the Israeli courts but instead in legal and public campaigns," he said. "One cannot say that Israel is an apartheid state and still go to the courts."

3

Preventing an Outbreak of Peace

Today Israel offers an entire political model for asymmetric warfare, a conflict between a state and irregular combatants.

Yotam Feldman, Israeli director of the documentary *The Lab* (2013)

Killing or injuring Palestinians should be as easy as ordering pizza. That was the logic behind an Israeli military–designed app in 2020 that allowed a commander in the field to send details about a target on an electronic device to troops who would then quickly neutralize that Palestinian. The colonel working on the project, Oren Matzliach, told the *Israel Defense* website that the strike would be "like ordering a book on Amazon or a pizza in a pizzeria using your smartphone."[1]

This kind of dehumanization is the inevitable result of endless occupation. It is also an export asset. What's appealing to growing numbers of regimes globally is learning how Israel gets away with politicide. That term was adapted to Israel/Palestine by the late Israeli scholar and professor of sociology Baruch Kimmerling, who argued in 2003 that Israel's domestic and foreign policy is "largely oriented towards one major goal: the politicide of the Palestinian people. By politicide I mean a process that has, as its ultimate goal, the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate social, political, and economic entity. This process may also but not necessarily include their partial or complete ethnic cleansing from the territory known as the Land of Israel."[2]

A rare moment of Israeli political honesty came in October 2021 when far-right Israeli parliamentarian Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the Religious Zionist Party and ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said in the Knesset to the Arab members, “You’re only here by mistake, because [founding prime minister David] Ben-Gurion didn’t finish the job, didn’t throw you out in ’48.” It was an acknowledgment that ethnic cleansing took place in 1948, albeit delivered by one of the most racist and homophobic Israeli politicians.

It is not a new point of view; in fact, it’s been state ideology since 1948. Declassified documents from the Israel State Archives in 2021 revealed that attitudes toward the Palestinians have not changed much since the 1940s. It has been official policy, at least among some of the nation’s senior military and political elites, to forcibly expel Arabs to neighboring countries for the entire period of the country’s existence. Reuven Aloni, deputy director general of the Israel Lands Administration, said during a 1965 meeting that the ideal goal was “population exchange.” He was optimistic “that a day will come, in another ten, fifteen or twenty years, when there will be a situation of a certain kind, with a war or something resembling a war, when the basic solution will be a matter of transferring the Arabs. I think that we should think about this as a final goal.”[3]

Yehoshua Verbin, commander of the military government that ruled over Arab citizens between 1948 and 1966, admitted that ethnic cleansing occurred in 1948. “We expelled around half a million Arabs, we burnt homes, we looted their land—from their point of view—we didn’t give it back, we took land …” he said. The “solution” offered, then and now, was eerily similar to Kimmerling’s thesis; either make the Arabs disappear, and if that was not possible render them unequal in the hope that they might emigrate by choice for a better life elsewhere. Kimmerling could have added that politicide became a marketable tool around the world for nations and officials that wanted to emulate Israeli “success.”

In 2002, Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld explained on Australian television what he saw as the dilemma faced by the Jewish state:

> They [Israeli soldiers] are very brave people … they are idealists … they want to serve their country and they want to prove themselves. The problem is that you cannot prove yourself against someone who is much weaker than yourself. They are in a lose-lose situation. If you are strong and fighting the weak, then if you kill your opponent then you are a scoundrel … if you let him kill you, then you are an idiot. So here is a dilemma which others have suffered before us, and for which as far as I can see there is simply no escape. Now the

> Israeli army has not by any means been the worst of the lot. It has not done what for instance the Americans did in Vietnam … it did not use napalm, it did not kill millions of people. So everything is relative, but by definition, to return to what I said earlier if you are strong and you are fighting the weak, then anything you do is criminal.[4]

Van Creveld was not factually wrong, but he underestimated how appealing the ideology of domination has become after more than seven decades of occupation. Israel's homeland security industry has effectively monetized its tools and strategy, showing with battle-tested examples how a belief in separation, keeping Palestinians and Israelis distant from each other so long as the latter dominated the former, was the solution in the short to medium term. Separatists, argued Kimmerling, wanted "the opposite of ethnic cleansing but it would have a similar practical and psychological outcome. It is rooted in a mixture of intertwined emotions: distrust, fear and a hatred of Arabs, combined with the desire to remove Israel from its immediate cultural milieu."[5]

Separatism is the ascendant ideology in the Israeli mainstream. Prominent Israeli historian Benny Morris told Reuters in 2020 that disappearing Palestinians from view was an ideal solution for Israeli Jews. "Israelis have gone off Palestinians," he said. "They want as little as possible to do with them, want as few of them around as possible and the [separation] fence [between Israel and the West Bank] helps that situation emerge."[6] Morris blamed that on the Palestinian campaign of suicide bombings during the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005 in which more than 3,100 Palestinians and 1,038 Israelis were killed, 6,000 Palestinians arrested, and 4,100 Palestinians homes destroyed.[7]

Another way to view separation was an idea pushed by West Bank settler Micah Goodman, who reportedly had the ear of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett when he assumed power in 2021. Goodman's vision was "shrinking the conflict." He explained to NPR that "most Israelis feel that if we stay in the West Bank, we have no future, and if we leave the West Bank, we have no future. Most Israelis are trapped in this catch." To resolve this conundrum, because the "conflict" with the Palestinians is unlikely to be resolved soon, Goodman said that Israel could "start shrinking it in steps that shrink occupation without shrinking security, which means shrink the amount that Israel controls Palestinians without increasing the amount the Palestinians could threaten Israelis." What this meant in practice was maintaining the status quo.[8]

The most effective example of separatism is the encirclement of Gaza, trapping more than 2 million Palestinians behind high fences, under constant drone surveillance, infrequent missile attack, and largely closed borders enforced by Israel and Egypt. When Israel completed the sixty-five-kilometer high-tech barrier along the entire border with Gaza in late 2021, at a cost of US$1.11 billion, a ceremony in southern Israel took place to mark the occasion. *Haaretz* described the wall as "a complex engineering and technological system: the only one of its kind in the world" that required construction assistance from Europe.[9]

Back in 2002, three years before Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdraw nine thousand Jewish settlers from Gaza, Israeli historian Van Creveld predicted the vision: "[The only solution is] building a wall between us and the other side, so tall that even the birds cannot fly over it … so as to avoid any kind of friction for a long, long time in the future … We could formally finish the problem, at least in Gaza, in forty-eight hours, by getting out and building a proper wall. And then of course, if anybody tries to climb over the wall, we kill him."[10]

Gaza is now the perfect laboratory for Israeli ingenuity in domination. It is the ultimate ethno nationalist dream, keeping Palestinians indefinitely imprisoned. The barrier around the territory was first built in 1994 and has undergone a range of upgrades since (though it was destroyed by Palestinians in 2001). Today its population has been placed in a forced experiment of control where the latest technology and techniques are tested. However, what is happening in Gaza is increasingly occurring globally. The Palestinian architect Yara Sharif said that "the Palestinianization of cities is happening worldwide. It's happening by destruction and erasure, but also with dramatic climate change."[11]

The November 2012 Israeli bombardment of Gaza, called Operation Pillar of Defense, was a seven-day war that killed 174 Palestinians and 6 Israelis and injured thousands more. While the death toll in that operation was relatively low, Israel's Operation Cast Lead in 2008 and early 2009 saw the death of 1,400 Gazans. That conflict saw a revolution in how the IDF portrayed the war across its multiple social media platforms. Worried that public opinion in some Western nations was turning against Israeli military actions, the so-called instawar was a coordinated enterprise to live-tweet military operations and infographics, produced to proudly announce the

killing of Hamas members or the arrest of Palestinian “terrorists.” These productions sometimes had the feel of a Hollywood-style, big-budget action film.

The Israeli social media strategy aimed to involve both domestic and global supporters of its military missions. By doing so, and asking backers to post their own supporting tweets, Face-book posts, or Instagram images, the IDF created a collective mission that other nations could easily mimic by stirring up nationalist fervor online. During Operation Pillar of Defense, the IDF encouraged supporters of Israel to both proudly share when “terrorists” were killed while at the same time reminding a global audience that the Jewish state was a victim. It was a form of mass conscription to the cause through the weaponization of social media.[12]

This was war as spectacle, and the IDF was spending big to make it happen. The IDF media budget allowed at least 70 officers and 2,000 soldiers to design, process, and disseminate official Israeli propaganda, and almost every social media platform was flooded with IDF content.

Today, the IDF Instagram page regularly features pro-gay and pro-feminist messaging alongside its hard-line militaristic iconography.[13] On October 1, 2021, the IDF posted across its social media platforms a photo of its headquarters swathed in pink light with this message: “For those who are fighting, for those who have passed, and for those who have survived, the IDF HQ is lit up pink this #BreastCancerAwarenessMonth.” Palestinian American activist Yousef Munayyer responded on Twitter: “An untold number of women in Gaza suffer from breast cancer and are routinely denied adequate treatment and timely lifesaving care because this military operates a brutal siege against over 2 million souls.” On Instagram, however, most of the comments below the post praised the IDF.

This kind of IDF information war strategy is now routinely copied by the US military. The CIA launched a social media campaign, Humans of CIA, in 2021 that aimed to recruit from more diverse communities into its ranks. It felt deeply inspired by the IDF’s woke posturing. One of the most discussed (and mocked) campaigns, considering the CIA’s role in destabilizing and overthrowing governments since World War II, was the video of a Latina intelligence officer declaring: “I am a cisgender millennial, who has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I am intersectional, but my existence is not a box-checking exercise. I used to

struggle with imposter syndrome, but at 36 I refuse to internalize misguided patriarchal ideas of what a woman can or should be."

Israel's social media strategy is a sophisticated attempt to link the Jewish state's operations with Western values, or at least those policies supporting a militarized response to terrorism (or resistance, depending on your perspective), hoping to engender it to global audiences. "Social media is a warzone for us here in Israel," said Lt. Col. (Ret.) Avital Leibovich, creator of the IDF social media unit and director of the American Jewish Committee in Israel, during 2014's Operation Protective Edge. It was a seven-week battle between Israel and Hamas that killed more than 2,250 Palestinians, many of them civilians, including 500 children, and 70 Israelis, most of whom were soldiers.

The unstated goal of the IDF information strategy is weaponizing Jewish trauma in the service of perpetuating occupation. Through countless posts and memes, the IDF believes that highlighting the sacrifices made by Israel in its never-ending battles with the Palestinians is a winning way. In this logic, Palestinians have no right to be angry about their plight and their trauma is nonexistent. Resisting the occupation is thus rendered illegitimate. This messaging ideology appeals to other nations, most of whom cannot match Israel in speed and sophistication, in their own wars with insurgents or domestic opponents. The tactic is always the same: a negative response to a badly received tweet or Facebook post is simply more posts and tweets, aiming to flood the internet with so much noise that the previous posts are quickly forgotten.

A comprehensive 2021 study of Operation Protective Edge's social media campaign by Marisa Tramontano, a sociologist at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, found that the IDF used a multitude of visual and written tools to justify its actions in Gaza and the West Bank. "Israel establishes itself, in part through its unmediated social media discourse, as part of the Islamophobic hegemonic coalition that positions Israel as the eastern-most front of the United States' 'global war on terrorism,'" Tramontano wrote.[14]

There was hope at the birth of the digital revolution that being able to film and disseminate photos and videos of Israeli abuses in Palestine might help the Palestinian cause. There is no doubt that global awareness of the occupation has soared, and that this has been partly assisted by the raw, unedited vision of Palestinians interacting with settlers or the Israeli army.

Yet there is also a large body of evidence that hard, visual imagery has been co-opted by the Israeli state to deny the reality of what Palestinians say they are experiencing. The Israelis claim that Palestinians are lying about their circumstances despite what we're all seeing. Being able to see Israeli atrocities against Palestinians doesn't work with people who do not view Palestinians as human beings, a racial group who deserve punishment and death. As the Israeli population has moved to the right, moral discomfort is rare.[15]

Israel's social media warriors know that connecting its mission to Washington's post-9/11 struggles is vital to eliciting sympathy and support. "The so-called threat of Palestinian terror constitutes a key component of Israeli trauma narratives—a quotidian threat layered on top of multigenerational trauma over exile and genocide," Tramontano argued:

> More concretely, Israel's actions are presented as moral and legal, and the state's current plight is explained in light of Israel's tragic past. Images of New York City burning then directly connect Israel's military operations to the American military response to the "trauma" of 9/11. Conversely, Hamas is cast as a barbarous and irrational enemy with no legitimate claims to trauma, much like narrations about al Qaeda, the self-declared Islamic State, and the like.[16]

The IDF introduced new weapons and paraded them in front of different defense media outlets during the 2014 Gaza war. The technology was profiled, though advertised would be a more accurate term, in Israeli and international media and included bombs, tank shells, and the Elbit Hermes drone.[17] A few weeks after the war ended, the annual Israel Unmanned Systems conference, an event hosted with the US Embassy in Tel Aviv to prospective markets in Asia, Europe, and North and South America, featured some of the weapons used in the Gaza conflict, including the Elbit drone.[18]

The next Israeli experiment was tested in real time during the Great March of Return, when Gazans protested alongside the fence with Israel. Starting in March 2018, it gained massive global attention as Palestinians peacefully demanded an end to the siege on Gaza and the right to return to lands stolen by Israel. Between March 2018 and December 2019, 223 Palestinians were killed, most of whom were civilians, and eight thousand were shot by snipers, some left with life-changing injuries. The IDF tweeted (but then deleted) on March 31: "Yesterday we saw 30,000 people; we arrived prepared and with precise reinforcements. Nothing was carried out

uncontrolled; everything was accurate and measured, and we know where every bullet landed."

Israel was so confident in its actions, without fear of the International Criminal Court or any domestic sanction, that Brigadier-General (Reserve) Zvika Fogel gave an interview on Israeli radio in April 2018. Fogel was a former chief of staff at Israel's Southern Command, which included Gaza. After Israeli snipers caused the death and injury of thousands of Palestinians, including children, radio host Ron Nesiel questioned Fogel and asked if the IDF should "rethink its use of snipers." Fogel said the use of snipers was appropriate: "If this child or anyone else gets close to the fence in order to hide an explosive device or check if there are any dead zones there or to cut the fence so someone could infiltrate the territory of the State of Israel to kill us …"

"Then his punishment is death?" Nesiel asked.

"His punishment is death," the general argued. "As far as I'm concerned then yes, if you can only shoot him to stop him, in the leg or arm—great. But if it's more than that then, yes, you want to check with me whose blood is thicker, ours or theirs."[19]

The Great March of Return was both a lab and showroom. The most sophisticated new weapon used against the Palestinian protesters was the "Sea of Tears," a drone that dropped tear gas canisters on a desired area. Despite Israeli claims of accuracy, a tent full of Palestinian women and children had tear gas dropped onto them, as did groups of reporters. Israeli police started using drones that dropped tear gas grenades on protestors in the West Bank in April 2021. One month later, Israel announced that a fleet of drones would be used to track riots and protests as well as areas damaged by rockets fired from Gaza. Israel announced in 2022 that it approved the use of armed drones for "targeted killings" in the West Bank.

Reportedly tested over Gaza before the major protests began in 2018, a Chinese-made drone by Da Jiang Innovations was reconfigured by Israel's Border Force, which was working with Israeli company Aeronautics to adapt the drone to on-the-ground service requirements. "Beyond the fact that it neutralizes all danger to our forces, it allows us to reach places that we had yet to reach," Border Police Commander Kobi Shabtai told Israel's Channel 2 news. The immediate effectiveness of the Sea of Tears led Maf'at, the Israeli Administration for the Development of Weapons and

Technological Infrastructure, to purchase hundreds of the drones after the first night of demonstrations in Gaza.

Another innovation was the "skunk water" drone, a form of liquid emitted from a water cannon that left a foul smell on clothes and body for a long time. Israeli firm Aeronautics was behind this innovation, a technique that had been already used in the West Bank and Jerusalem to deter protestors. Reports appeared in early 2020 by anti-occupation activists in the West Bank that Israeli-controlled talking drones were flying overhead and sending out a "Go Home" message to Palestinian protestors. Israeli activists were told in Hebrew not to "stand with the enemy."[20]

A report by the Israeli group, Coalition of Women for Peace, stressed that the Israeli use of drones "fits into a worldwide pattern: though today aimed primarily against Palestinians, similar technology will likely be marketed and sold to oppress others worldwide. The ISF [Israeli Security Forces] maintains that such tactics ultimately hurt fewer people, yet they indeed are more unpredictable."[21] It wasn't until 2022 that Israel officially acknowledged that it used assault drones (though Palestinians have known for years).

The Israeli response to the protests was a source of pride in the Israeli defense sector. At an annual arms conference hosted in Tel Aviv on May 15, 2018, by *IsraelDefense* magazine called Fire, Maneuvering, and Intelligence in a Complex Environment, one thousand members of the IDF, Israeli private industry, and foreign representatives mingled and shared war stories. The key speakers included the former Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon and head of the Southern Command Yoav Galant, who led operations during the Gaza war in late 2008 and early 2009. Israeli human rights group Yesh Gvul accused Galant of committing war crimes during this round of conflict, Operation Cast Lead. The future of combat was on everybody's mind, and sponsors of the events, including Elbit and Aeronautics, had the answers: more sophisticated weapons to fight guerrilla battles that mirrored the situation in Gaza.[22]

The May 2021 conflict between Hamas and Israel, Operation Guardian of the Walls, felt like history repeating yet again.[23] Aside from the horrific death toll—260 Palestinians were killed, of whom at least 129 were civilians, as well as 12 Israeli civilians—the symbiotic relationship between Israel and the US defense sectors was laid bare.[24] Mohammed Abu

Mughaisib, a medic for Médecins Sans Frontières in Gaza, wrote that the 2021 war was "not like her siblings [previous Israeli bombardments]. The terrifying continuous bombing on a massive scale, the lack of safety anywhere at any time: we were petrified … There were no coordinated pauses in bombing to allow for humanitarian work."[25]

Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused Israel and Hamas of violating the laws of war and demanded "global and national judicial institutions should step up to break the vicious cycle of unlawful attacks and impunity for war crimes."[26] It chastised Washington for providing the weapons "used in at least two of the [Israeli] attacks" it investigated. Its suggestion was weak, however, asking that the US "should condition future security assistance to Israel on it taking concrete and verifiable actions to improve its compliance with the laws of war and international human rights law, and to investigate past abuses."[27]

An Al Jazeera English investigation found that weapons manufacturer Boeing made the GBU-31 and GBU-39 bombs and General Dynamics produced the MK-84 bombs, arms used to destroy civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including, on May 15, 2021, a building that housed the Associated Press and Al Jazeera offices. US companies were directly profiting from Israel's attack on Gaza and dead Palestinian civilians. US taxpayers were the purchaser of these munitions, which were then exported to the Jewish state.[28]

Still, many viewed the short war as a victory for Hamas because it withstood the Israeli military onslaught through its increasingly sophisticated equipment, including drones, an unmanned submarine, and more accurate and longer-range missiles. The gap in military power between the two sides, while still clear, was shrinking. Although the civilian death toll was disproportionally on the Palestinian side, Israel's battle-tested weaponry could not deliver anything resembling victory.[29]

None of this was likely to negatively impact Israeli arms sales. "Battle-tested over Gaza" was a badge of honor. Canada under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau purchased Elbit-made Hermes 900 drones worth US$28 million in late 2020. This drone was first tested during the 2014 Gaza war. Canada claimed that the drones would be used for surveillance purposes in the Arctic "to detect oil spills, survey ice and marine habitats." The equipment would help "to keep our waters clean and safe." The deployment

of the Hermes was for civilian purposes, but a leading Israeli arms manufacturer benefitted from the deal.[30]

The normalization of Israeli hardware was relentless and almost unremarked upon in the mainstream media, though the president of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, Thomas Woodley, explained what was at stake. The Hermes drone sale, he said, "bolsters the profits of an Israeli weapons company which builds drones to monitor and target Palestinian civilians under occupation."[31]

More strident protests occurred in Britain, where the Conservative government signed a deal with Elbit in January 2021 to invest US$134 million in equipment to assist soldiers in quickly accessing battlefield target information. Activists occupied and shut down an Elbit factory in Oldham, Greater Manchester. Protestors constantly targeted the factory in 2020 and 2021, and other Elbit sites, including its London headquarters, and painted the site in "blood red."

The Ferranti Technologies plant in Oldham, owned by Elbit, made parts for drones that were used for intelligence gathering. During one action, in February 2021, a member of Palestine Action wrote that Elbit was "guilty of extreme violence through testing its weapons on Palestinian children and then exporting them to other oppressive regimes across the world."[32] Three British activists were acquitted in December 2021 after a judge found that their actions against Elbit didn't constitute a threat to public order. After years of pressure by Palestine Action, the

Oldham plant was sold by Elbit in 2022 and the company's London headquarters shut down in the same year.

Israel's constant drone surveillance over Gaza also impressed President Vladimir Putin. Moscow needed reliable surveillance drones after it lost many planes during its war in 2008 against Georgia in South Ossetia. Tbilisi had used Israeli drones, and years later Moscow decided to follow suit. Having seen Israeli operations over Gaza, Russia licensed the Israeli Aerospace Industries Searcher II, renamed "Forpost" by its new owners, and it became a key asset in Russian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.[33] Israel trained Russian pilots to operate the drones.

Russia and Israel maintained a close relationship during the Syrian civil war despite the former supporting Assad and the latter worrying about the

growing presence of Russian allies Iran and Hizbollah in the country. This led Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (and Naftali Bennett) to routinely attack Iranian and Syrian military positions in Syria to stop the transfer of weapons to Hizbollah. However, Moscow usually turned a blind eye to these attacks, assisted by a de-escalation hotline between the two governments.[34]

Assad was preferable to any alternative, according to Israel. Although it gave humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees within Syria who were fleeing the conflict in 2018, it also armed and funded so-called rebel groups in southern Syria as early as 2013, many of whom were hardline Islamists, to help stop Iranian-supported groups coming too close to the Israeli–Syrian border.

Starting shortly after Putin's intervention in the civil war on September 30, 2015, the Forpost was promoted in pro-Russian media propaganda as an effective tool over the skies of Syria. Moscow's backing of Assad was vital in his victory against an insurgency that saw the virtual destruction of an entire country for a decade starting in 2011. Russia fired more than 39,000 airstrikes in the first three years of its operations in Syria, targeting both the Islamic State and so-called rebels opposed to Assad. Around 23,000 Syrian civilians were killed by Russian actions between 2015 and 2019.[35] Humanitarian infrastructure like hospitals and civilian ferries was attacked, and Moscow never admitted to killing even one civilian.

Although the Israeli-licensed drones were not firing any missiles, piloted Russian jets working alongside them fired missiles after receiving intelligence, yet both Russia and Israel escaped international sanction. These drones did not directly kill anyone, and therefore were not legally classified as a weapon. This was a loophole being exploited by many nation-states because surveillance technology was moving much faster than laws could be written or enforced. Neither Russia nor Israel has ever faced accountability for their strange coalition in Syria. In September 2021, the United Nations estimated that more than 350,000 Syrians, including both civilians and combatants, had been killed since 2011, though the UN admitted that this number was an "under-count of the actual number of killings."

There's an endless supply of customers wanting Israeli weapons expertise. The Israeli siege of Gaza is a case in point. The Israeli company Xtend developed drones with the IDF that could be remotely controlled with

augmented and virtual reality technology. Drones were intercepting enemy drones by throwing nets around them at close range, and the US military ran a pilot program in 2020 for its own purposes, seeing huge potential. “We reduce two years of training into five minutes,” company cofounder and CEO Aviv Shapira said. “Soldiers arrive, and within 10 minutes of training they start downing balloons in the Gaza Strip.”[36]

The company acknowledged that “the system’s capabilities have been demonstrated in Israel, with confirmed interceptions of incendiary devices flown over the Gaza border by terrorist organizations.” Shapira said that “dumb” kamikaze drones were the main target because these machines couldn’t be intercepted by signal interference and physical capture was the only solution. Shapira said the technology was reminiscent of the movie *Iron Man*. The technology gave users the feeling of being inside the drone itself, “enabling the operator to immerse themselves or ‘step into’ a remote reality and engage targets effectively yet safely.”[37]

Xtend was on a roll when the US Pentagon signed a deal for dozens of its drones in 2021 that specialized in indoor and urban areas use. Xtender, which had been tested at Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona, one of the biggest military installations in the world, was designed to infiltrate buildings without risking the lives of soldiers. US special forces used the company’s drones in Syria and Afghanistan. Some of the more aggressive Israeli killer drones have been used in foreign war zones, including Afghanistan, where Germany, Canada, Britain, and Australia used Israeli drones to hunt the Taliban and other militants.

The exact number of people killed by US (or Israeli) drones since September 11, 2001, is unknown. The first US drone strike was a botched effort to kill Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Some estimates put the number of individuals killed by the US military and CIA between 9,000 and 17,000, which includes at least 2,200 children. The UK-based transparency organization Airwars released a report on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 and found that the US had unleashed at least 91,340 strikes across seven major war zones in the previous twenty years and that the civilian death toll was between 22,679 and 48,308.[38]

It is arguable whether drone attacks, launched by drone pilots against people who have no idea what’s coming, are even war at all but something

more grotesque; dehumanization of those targeted because there is no real, human contact between the attacker and victim.[39] Israel and the US instead celebrate these killings by releasing drone footage to the media.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to believe that Israeli drone pilots have never considered the impact of their work. One male operator, who had worked during the 2014 Gaza war, told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*: "Your body feels fatigued, the exhaustion builds up. There is no day and no night—and that's how the terrorists work. On a personal level, the state of combat does something. It weighs on you, all the deaths on both sides."[40]

The driving force behind many of Israel's most celebrated defense products is Unit 8200. The intelligence unit of the IDF, it is the equivalent of the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US and is staffed by elite young recruits with an appetite for spying, computer hacking, and surveillance. Its primary goal is mass monitoring of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, detailing all their personal and political information, and listening to communications from allies and foes across the world. This is achieved principally through a base in the Negev desert where lines of satellite dishes suck up domestic and international calls and a range of other communications. The Urim base feeds information to Unit 8200 and Israel collates details from both the base and covert listening posts in its embassies around the globe. Urim is one of the world's biggest signals intelligence stations.[41]

NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden said that he was shocked by the extent of intelligence sharing between the US and Israel, raw private communications that included content and metadata. Such details would usually be "minimized," meaning that personally identifiable data was removed, but the NSA was sharing huge amounts of emails and phone calls of Arab and Palestinian Americans whose relatives in Palestine may become targets due to the information gleaned. "I think that's amazing," Snowden said. "It's one of the biggest abuses we've seen."[42]

The Snowden documents show how the Israelis received quantities of intelligence and data sharing from the US, Canada, and the UK, much of which they use to fight what they call "Palestinian terrorism." But the UK and the US also view the Jewish state as a threat to regional stability due to its belligerent policies toward Iran and activities across the Middle East.

The National Intelligence Estimate has alleged that Israel is "the third most aggressive intelligence service against the US."[43]

Another US concern was around nations such as Israel, lumped in a 2007 NSA Strategic Mission List with Russia, China, Venezuela, Iran, Pakistan, France, South Korea, Cuba, and North Korea, conducting espionage and intelligence collection operations "against the US government, military, science and technology and the intelligence community."[44] This assessment predicts the growing US concern in the 2020s over Israeli cyberweapons, such as those developed by the Israeli government–backed NSO Group, and their deployment against US assets and allies around the world.

However, the allure of Unit 8200 for a state that views itself as beleaguered is the time and space given to recruits to develop the most sophisticated cyberweapons and the absence of a moral code to oversee their use. These weapons are used by Israel itself—for example, in the Stuxnet computer worm that Israel and the US developed to damage the Iranian nuclear program, which was exposed in 2010—or taken into the private sector once they leave. Such projects can be lucrative and allow these Israelis to live the "start-up nation" myth, developing new tools to spy on people while selling them as innovation. Citizens in countless nations are negatively impacted by products designed by Unit 8200 veterans, who staff countless prominent and secretive Israeli companies, including NSO Group, the world's most-successful cyber-surveillance firm. Arab citizens of Israel hardly ever serve in the unit, which has a staff of around 10,000.[45] Unit 8200 is growing in size and engages in offensive cyber attacks against perceived enemies.

Working for Unit 8200 almost guarantees a lucrative future. Veterans earn 20 percent more than the industry average, and 80 percent of them are offered jobs three months or more before they leave their positions, according to GotFriends Ltd., a company focused on recruitment in the tech sector. The cyber industry has boomed in the twenty-first century, and the average salary of a cybersecurity employee surged 37.5 percent between 2009 and 2016, according to the Israel-based human resources management company Ethosia-Human Resources.[46]

Some are recruited to non-Israeli companies and paid far more than they could ever imagine. In one of the more infamous cases, veterans were

poached by DarkMatter, a United Arab Emirates company specializing in spying and hacking. The UAE government also used its services against perceived enemies such as human rights activists and journalists. DarkMatter paid the Israeli recruits, including some from NSO Group, US$1 million, together with lavish bonuses and luxury homes in Cyprus.

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* asked in 2019 whether graduates of Unit 8200 should be using "the knowledge and skills they gained during their service to work for an Arab cyber firm with close ties to a dictatorial regime that does not have diplomatic relations with Israel?"[47] However, the UAE established full relations with Israel in 2020 under US President Donald Trump. In 2021, the UAE said it hoped to secure US$1 trillion worth of economic ties between itself and Israel in the next decade.

Ariel Parnes spent more than twenty years working for Unit 8200 in a range of areas including intelligence and cyber warfare. He then became the cofounder of Mitiga, a company aimed to counter cloud cyberattacks, and said in an interview that the strength of his former state employer was its annual influx of new, young recruits with fresh ideas. There was no mention of the work the unit undertook in the occupied Palestinian territories, but he instead focused on its "disruptive" approach to IT.[48]

In an age of mass surveillance, intensely learning the best ways to monitor people has never been more appealing to many states. However, the priority is first controlling the occupied population in Palestine. Israeli firm Mer Security, whose CEO Nir Lempert is a Unit 8200 veteran, is a global operation with 1,200 employees operating in more than forty countries. In 1999, it won a contract to establish "Mabat 2000," hundreds of cameras in Jerusalem's Old City to monitor occupied Palestinians. Haim Mer, chairman of the firm's board and another Unit 8200 veteran, has said that "the police needed a system in which 'Big Brother' would control and would allow for an overall view of events in the Old City area."[49] Company President Chaim Mer has admitted that its global success was principally thanks to the Israeli police for installing these CCTV cameras; potential clients could see the work in action.

Unit 8200 experience contributed to Mer Security building the Open Source Collection Analysis and Response (Oscar) tool, which scanned social media accounts and the internet to find open source connections. Countless other firms have worked on similar applications, but Israeli firms

get the edge because they point to their work in Palestine as evidence of successful operations. The UK-based Arab Organisation for Human Rights (AOHR) released a report in 2013 that focused on Mer Security and detailed how the Old City surveillance system negatively impacted Palestinian residents' ability to maintain privacy where they lived, shopped, and prayed.

Nonetheless, this must have impressed the United Nations, which in 2020 announced that Mer Security, Elbit, and Israel Aerospace Industries had won contracts to provide security for UN bases in Mali, with the work including the installation of CCTV cameras, drones, and threat detection systems. The UN was being lobbied aggressively by Israeli companies to secure similar work at the forty peacekeeping bases throughout the world.[50] In February 2020, the UN released a report on the firms with ties to illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank; ninety-four based in Israel and eighteen in six other nations. The UN urged the companies to cease working in occupied territories, and yet the global body itself had no problem partnering with Israeli corporations to protect its bases in Africa.

A serving Unit 8200 commander, Brigadier General Y, published a book in English on Amazon in 2021, *The Human Machine Team*, which was unique; it was rare to find serving senior officers giving insights into their work in a unit that thrived on secrecy. His vision was a future where humans and machines worked seamlessly to solve "national security threats and challenges, lead to victory in war and serve as a growth engine for humankind." General Y wrote that Israel had pioneered the art of quickly detecting anomalies in huge amounts of data such as the position of a mobile phone of a "lone wolf" in a potential place of attack.[51] This presumed that Israeli methods weren't targeting an overly wide number of Palestinians who had no connection with terrorism. The evidence from many accounts proves that all Palestinians are monitored regardless of age, location, or intent.

Dissent from within Unit 8200 was for a long time almost unheard of. An open letter in 2014 written by veterans changed all that. Sent to then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, forty-three reserve soldiers explained why they refused to serve in the occupied territories. It read in part:

> The Palestinian population under military rule is completely exposed to espionage and surveillance by Israeli intelligence. While there are severe limitations on the surveillance of Israeli citizens, the Palestinians are not afforded this protection. There's no distinction between Palestinians who are, and are not, involved in violence. Information that is collected and stored harms innocent people. It is used for political persecution and to create divisions within Palestinian society by recruiting collaborators and driving parts of Palestinian society against itself.

One of the signatories, Sergeant Nadav, told the *Guardian* that they had entered Unit 8200 with the mistaken belief that they were protecting the Israeli-Jewish population from terrorism, but in reality, "The intelligence gathering on Palestinians is not clean in that sense. When you rule a population … they don't have political rights, laws like we have. The nature of this regime of ruling over people, especially when you do it for many years, it forces you to take control, infiltrate every aspect of their life."[52] Nadav continued:

> Any Palestinian may be targeted and may suffer from sanctions such as the denial of permits, harassment, extortion, or even direct physical injury. Such instances might occur if the individual is of any interest to the system for any reason. Be it indirect relations with hostile individuals, physical proximity to intelligence targets, or connections to topics that interest 8200 as a technological unit. Any information that might enable extortion of an individual is considered relevant information. Whether said individual is of a certain sexual orientation, cheating on his wife, or in need of treatment in Israel or the West Bank—he is a target for blackmail.[53]

An anonymous Unit 8200 veteran said in 2021 that what he used to do was far from the cutting-edge image cultivated by Israel. Instead, he lamented, it was about blackmailing gay Palestinians, threatening Palestinians with health issues, or cutting off essential medical care if they did not comply.[54] The system of control is complete because any Palestinian trait, whether benign or private, is leveraged to extract a price from an occupied people. Every Palestinian is defined as a threat, and civil society actors are arguably seen by Israel as the most threatening because they could mobilize international support against the occupation.

Another Unit 8200 whistle-blower said that every phone conversation in the West Bank and Gaza could be listened to by Israeli surveillance. He told *Middle East Eye* in 2021 that nothing was off limits; Israeli soldiers invaded the public and private lives of Palestinians and laughed when they heard people talking about sex. "It might be finding gays who can be pressured to report on their relatives, or finding some man who is cheating on his wife," he said. "Finding someone who owes money to someone, let's say, means

that he can be contacted and offered money to pay his debt in exchange for his collaboration."[55]

In the 2018 book *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*, Israeli reporter Ronen Bergman interviews "Amir," a Unit 8200 veteran who had refused to carry out a blatantly illegal order in 2003 after a horrific Palestinian suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that had killed twenty-three people. Amir successfully stopped the bombing of a Palestinian office building in Gaza with no connection to terrorism. One colleague did not understand his hesitation. "Why does it seem manifestly illegal to you?" the man asked. "They're all Arabs. They're all terrorists." Bergman is matter of fact about the real role of Unit 8200. "Unofficially they were deciding whom Israel killed."[56]

It was a world away from how most in the mainstream media have glorified Unit 8200 and its exploits. A *Forbes* story in 2016 mentioned the Palestinians once in passing and instead celebrated the huge number of alumni who had founded their own start-ups (over one thousand at that time, wrote the magazine). The article's focus was on the companies launched by the unit's veterans and the innovation required to develop them, but said nothing about the moral and ethical questions around who was being monitored by Unit 8200 and why.[57] A *Financial Times* feature in 2015 at least mentioned the Unit 8200 dissenters and their public letter and how alumni produced cyber tools sold to repressive states.[58] Daniel is a Unit 8200 veteran. He does not want his last name publicly revealed due to the sensitivity of his previous actions. He was one of the forty-three soldiers who signed the letter in 2014 that detailed the actions of Israel's secretive intelligence unit. "I'm not a whistle-blower," he told me, "because whistle-blowers reveal new information but we didn't do much of that. What we did release was vetted by the military."

Daniel was born in 1985 and grew up in Tel Aviv with Argentinian-born parents who had moved to Israel. His mother's parents were Holocaust survivors and his father was forced to flee Argentina in 1977, arriving in Israel as a refugee, during the reign of dictator Jorge Rafael Videla—whom Israel had supported. Daniel's childhood was dominated by the wave of Palestinian suicide bombings that rocked Israel. He would rarely take buses and spent little time outside. "I grew up in a home that wasn't very

opinionated," he said. "My parents were more eager to fit in and felt less qualified to have an opinion."

When he joined the military, he was "very ignorant" about the conflict with the Palestinians. "I thought it was two-sided conflict, like a conflict between two countries. I believed that the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." An expert in math and computer science, he was quickly recruited into Unit 8200. To this day, he cannot reveal the details of what he did, but it was working against "enemies" such as Palestinians, Iran, Hamas, Hizbollah, and others in the region. "I was soaked in the atmosphere and proud to be there," he said. "I started to feel like we were doing important stuff for the defense of Israel."

It was not until after Daniel left Unit 8200 that his questions and doubts grew. He said he was persuaded into taking a stand after the mass nationwide protests in 2011 that pushed for lower living costs. Although not focused on the occupation, the protests forced him to reconsider his military role. Daniel had this "burning sense of responsibility. I had done something bad. I don't feel like I've made amends by signing the letter but it was an attempt." By then, he knew that the occupation was not about "self-defense. The [2014] letter was a moral opposition to the occupation. We're ruling a civilian population with no rights, a military dictatorship. We were declaring a position against this."

Daniel today works in IT in London and is still a critic of Israel, but he couches his criticism in concerned terms, hoping to improve the Jewish state. Back in 2014, "We wanted to speak to Israeli Jews but not do anything to harm the defense and security of Israel. We saw ourselves as akin to previous groups and individuals who declared publicly their refusal to serve in the IDF."

The Covid-19 pandemic was the perfect opportunity for Israeli surveillance firms to attract business; arresting the spread of the disease required effective contact tracing and Israeli companies promoted themselves as the best in the world. By April 2020, only a few months after the disease started causing havoc globally, Israeli spyware company NSO Group was promoting itself as a savior to the international media. Then Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett announced in March 2020 that the government was partnering with NSO to tackle the pandemic. Members of Unit 8200 helped out as well. In a display of its Fleming analytics software to the

BBC, NSO showed how the system claimed to predict where the next infections might take place, when ventilators might be required in certain areas, and when areas could come out of lockdowns.[59]

NSO Group claimed that privacy of individuals included the data used was protected but the London-based investigative organization Forensic Architecture founded by Israeli architect Eyal Weizman reported in late 2020 that there was evidence that personal data used in testing from Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Rwanda was identifiable. Most of these countries had purchased and used NSO's spyware tool, Pegasus.[60]

A range of at least eight high-profile Israeli surveillance firms went about claiming that their spying technology could benefit states fighting a pandemic. Cellebrite sells tools to governments and police forces around the world to hack mobile phones and offered its services, as did Rayzone Group, Cobwebs Technologies, and Patternz. No country admitted to buying Israeli surveillance technology, but evidence pointed to a number of nations in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

The most honest comment about the company's real aim came from a former Israeli intelligence officer Tal Dilian, based in Cyprus and head of Intellexa, a cyber-surveillance company working with intelligence agencies in Europe and Southeast Asia. After telling Reuters that his equipment to track Covid cost between US$9 million and US$16 million, he acknowledged that dealing with the pandemic was just the beginning of its useful capabilities, saying that Intellexa surveillance tools could fight espionage and aid security. "We want to enable them to upgrade," he said. Intellexa spyware has been found in the hands of a notorious Sudanese militia and in many other repressive states.[61]

Israel's response to Covid-19 was unprecedented in the Western world. It used its internal security service, the Shin Bet, to track and monitor potential Covid cases (though it had been secretly collecting all mobile phone metadata since at least 2002[62]) and follow social media posts for any evidence of social gatherings. There was an outcry among the Israeli media class and some politicians, angered that a system designed to oppress Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem could be turned on Israeli Jews. Not that any of them said this outright, but the implication was clear: do what you want to monitor Palestinians with the Shin Bet and make their

lives hell but do not use it on us.[63] There was also silence about Israel's export of surveillance tools to regimes around the world, with many Israeli critics unable or unwilling to make the connection with the nation's Covid-19 response and the companies tasked to do it having had years of experience selling these tools to dictatorships and democracies.

When challenged in Israel's High Court by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Ministry of Health claimed that Shin Bet was more respectful of privacy than any private companies, including NSO Group, that were contracted to manage data. This irony was not lost on Palestinians, who lived under an oppressive regime of monitoring, torturing, targeting, harassment, and arrest every day in the occupied territories.[64] Israeli human rights groups routinely challenged Shin Bet's operations during the pandemic, but its powers were rarely curtailed. It was an entity largely above the law. "Millions of Israelis are now subject to the same Shin Bet–style monitoring once reserved mainly for terrorist suspects," *Haaretz* complained in April 2020, ignoring the fact that countless Palestinians under Shin Bet surveillance weren't terrorists at all.[65]

It was not long before the GPS tracking used by the Shin Bet to fight Covid was turned on Palestinians. Countless Palestinians in East Jerusalem received text messages in May 2021 from Israeli intelligence claiming that "you were identified in violent acts in Al-Aqsa mosque. We will charge you. We will settle the score."[66] The Shin Bet admitted in 2022 that it had also sent the messages to many Arabs with no connection to violence.[67]

Perhaps the only positive aspect of Covid in Israel was the awakening of some Israeli Jews to the oppressive state of Shin Bet monitoring usually reserved for Palestinians. During the making of an Al Jazeera English film with UK filmmaker Dan Davies in 2021 on the threats to free speech and liberty during the pandemic, *Under the Cover of Covid*, we interviewed Or Biron, a Jewish resident in Tel Aviv who regularly protested then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. During one of the lock-downs, she met with fellow activists and a few days later was sent a text message from the government stating that she had been near someone with Covid and had to immediately isolate herself.

"I felt really angry," Biron said. "I had a feeling that because we were there [meeting with activists], like many people from the protest, it happened [getting told to isolate] because of this event." It was impossible

to be certain that The Shin Bet was trying to disrupt protest against the government, but this happened to a number of other people as well. Because The Shin Bet was both working to stop any opposition to the government and also tasked to protect citizens from Covid, the organization was given unprecedented powers to control the population and could act in complete darkness.

For Or Biron, she told us that she believed that citizens had to fight Shin Bet interference in "all areas. It doesn't matter if it happens to an Israeli citizen or someone in the occupied territories. This is a slippery slope toward violating human rights."

From the beginning of the pandemic, Israel used its arsenal of surveillance capabilities and hired private firms to provide extra controlling services. Palestinians from the West Bank who resided in Israel and wanted to know if their work permits were still valid were told to download an app that allowed the army to track the person's location.

Surveillance companies globally expressed excitement about the prospect of their services being used during the pandemic. Israeli corporations were at the front of the queue. Carbyne, founded by former members of Israeli military intelligence, was promoted as a next-generation 911 emergency call service that requested a user's access to their mobile phone, access that then allowed use of its video and location services to better serve the individual. It was used during the pandemic to accurately locate Covid patients. The threats to privacy were obvious but barely mentioned in most of the positive media around the product.[68] It was backed by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, billionaire investor Peter Thiel, and a small investment from (now-deceased) pedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

The Israeli firm Supercom was an expert in electronic ankle monitors and sold its product to follow prisoners leaving jail in the US. It saw interest spike during Covid-19, with its advertising explicitly mentioning that its expertise on imprisoned or convicted individuals could be used to detect Covid-19 in the general population.[69] Finland embraced the technology in 2021 when buying "biometric offender monitoring technology," a fancy way to say GPS tracking. Supercom sold 30,000 electronic bracelets to Israel in 2021 to enforce quarantine restrictions.

Decades of occupation thus made Israel ready for the Covid-19 challenge. Defense companies repurposed their systems in the service of helping the Jewish state tackle the pandemic. The Israeli Ministry of Defense published a document that listed all the major Israeli defense firms, including Elbit and NSO Group, and promoted them to other states as providing the ideal solutions "to address the various needs of authorities during times of emergency." In May 2020, Israel admitted that it aimed to expand its defense exports specifically tracking civilians. Aside from Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, every country on the planet was deemed fair game for sales.[70]

In the Israeli media, Elbit and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems spoke glowingly of their service in fighting the Covid pandemic, including the adaption of command-and-control systems and thermal cameras for missiles, and many in the Israeli press didn't ask questions. Israel converted a missile production facility to make ventilators. Israel's intelligence service, Mossad, was tasked to source essential medical equipment from around the globe.[71] A story in *Haaretz* in April 2020 quoted Dr. Oren Caspi, head of the advanced heart failure program at Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, who said, "We're very good at the war sciences and war technology, and this is a war. We need to take the technologies we use in war and implement them on the medical battlefield."[72] Nowhere in the story was it mentioned on whom these technologies were normally used: the Palestinians.

The *New York Times* was no better, with a story in May 2020 headlined "Israeli Army's Idea Lab Aims at a New Target: Saving Lives."[73] The story was little more than a list of supposed Israeli developments to fight Covid-19. Palestinians were invisible. The article contained the same tired words like "creativity" and "energy" that one read in countless pieces about Israel as a "start-up nation," but nothing about where so much of that defense "creativity" is normally directed.

The occupation of Palestine inevitably came home and was used against the Jewish population under the guise of managing the pandemic. The poor ultra-Orthodox community of Bnei Brek, six kilometers from Tel Aviv with a population of 210,000 people, were guinea pigs in an operation that was usually directed only against Palestinians in the West Bank. Covid was surging out of control and many residents, cut off from modern forms of

media and living on top of each other in small apartments, did not know which public health orders to follow.[74] Some senior leaders initially ignored any restrictions on their activities and continued praying and congregating together.

In April 2020, Bnei Brek was sealed off and only rare exceptions were granted for entry or departure. The Israeli tech company Octopus Services was contracted to provide command-and-control systems, drones, five hundred cameras, and observation balloons to assist in the mission.[75] Octopus also works with the Israeli Ministry of Defense, Israel's intelligence agencies, and a range of other companies.

In a failed attempt to convince the High Court to overturn the extreme measures, four residents of the city elicited a revealing response from the justices where they followed the same logic that the court had used for decades to justify and support repressive measures against Palestinians. The judges said that during a time of emergency in a democratic nation, when social distancing and Shin Bet monitoring had become the norm, "All these pass us by like a dystopian dream in a democratic state where civil liberties are at the core of its existence."[76] It was staggering hypocrisy, even from a court that has granted legal justification for more than half a century of occupation.

Orthodox Jews in Bnei Brek and beyond were not given much public sympathy because many Israeli Jews despised them for their self-imposed isolation in their own secretive communities, refusal to serve in the IDF, and being huge recipients of welfare. For some sections of the Israeli public, there's more hatred toward Orthodox communities than Palestinians.

4

Selling Israeli Occupation to the World

We're two democracies at the edge of the Mediterranean. We have Athens and Jerusalem, as I never tire of saying, are the ones who laid the foundations for our modern Western civilization and we share common aspirations for stability, prosperity and security.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, February 2021

Israeli borders have steadily shifted and expanded from their moorings. Geographic realities have been no impediment to draconian immigration policies that receive widespread Israeli and Jewish backing.[1] With tens of thousands of African refugees fleeing persecution in Eritrea and Sudan in the last decade seeking shelter in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu's regime aimed to bribe, cajole, and negotiate secretly with repressive African states to send people back. Israeli business leaders and politicians pressured South Sudan, Chad, and Central African Republic to accept African refugees, with Israel giving unenforceable promises to protect them in these nations. The Israeli government even considered forcibly returning Sudanese migrants, giving them a small amount of money and recruiting them to a Darfuri militia to fight Sudan, an outfit that was to be initially trained on Ugandan soil.[2]

Most of these plans failed, but countless Africans were returned to Africa from Israel after receiving a nominal amount of money, US$3,500. They arrived in unfamiliar African nations, Uganda and Rwanda, and were forced to fend for themselves. Israel struck deals with these nations, either

selling them weapons or securing diplomatic support for them in international forums.

I met one of them, Eritrean migrant Robel Tesfahannes, who ended up in South Sudan after spending six years in Tel Aviv. In 2015, we spent time together in the South Sudanese capital, Juba. He lived in Shirikat, a poor, dusty area with tin sheds for homes and shops, near the city center and on the main road to Uganda. It was a grim existence. He found it hard to secure any work, as his body was covered in tattoos and he had little money. He craved security in Europe, having fled mandatory army service in Eritrea. “I’m not scared of drowning in the Mediterranean,” he told me. “God decides my fate.”

Robel was treated badly in Israel, the victim of constant racism. “The Israeli government said bad things about us Africans,” he said, “and I felt Israelis looked at us suspiciously.” Fewer than 1 percent of Africans have ever been granted asylum in Israel. He eventually decided to take the money offered him by Israel and landed in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, with the promise of work and support, but this never materialized. He found his way to Juba, lured by the promise of safety and potential earnings from other Eritreans who stayed in South Sudan for a time on the long journey from Africa to Europe. He eventually crossed the Mediterranean in a boat, after getting through the Sahara and Libya and settling in Germany, where I saw him again in 2016 at a detention center in Hamburg. He is now settled there, one of the lucky ones to have survived years of uncertainty.

Robel’s story was instructive because it showed how Israel had pushed back its borders to accommodate its distaste for Africans. Bribing African states assured that its policy goals were at least partially met. By completing a wall along its border with Egypt in 2013, principally constructed to stop African migrants and others that many Israelis called “infiltrators,” African arrivals slowed down considerably. Israel’s hardline anti-migrant Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked said in June 2021 that she would “work to return infiltrators to their country and encourage voluntary departure to safe third countries.” The roughly 31,000 African migrants living in Israel found their lives stuck in limbo.

It is acceptable and mainstream to hate Africans in Israel. In March 2018, one of Israel’s two chief rabbis, Yitzhak Yosef, called black people “monkeys” and the Hebrew version of the word “nigger” during his weekly sermon.[3] Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, both advisors to then US

President Donald Trump, were blessed by the rabbi when they visited Israel in May 2018. The rabbi paid no professional price for his racism because it was shared by so many others.

The Israeli drone hovered high above the Mediterranean. Was it looking for a migrant boat in distress or drug smugglers? It wasn't clear. The drone almost had the sky to itself. Starting in May 2021, after testing in Crete in 2018, the Airbus-run Israel Aerospace Industries Heron drone became a tool for Frontex, the European Union (EU) border agency, in its battle to keep refugees away from the continent's mainland.

"It's almost impossible to cross the Mediterranean [as a migrant]," said Felix Weiss, head of airborne operations for the German NGO Sea-Watch, a group working to assist in the rescue of migrants. "Frontex has become a militarized actor, its equipment coming from war zones."

The Heron drone can theoretically fly for up to forty hours, having had years of experience over Palestine. Although Germany used these drones in Afghanistan in the failed war against the Taliban, where at least four crashed, they're still viewed positively by many nations because of the large amount of equipment they carry and their ability to stay in the air for around 24 hours.[4] Their equipment includes thermal-imaging cameras, artificial intelligence to detect moving targets, and a device to locate mobile phones.

And whereas once naval patrol boats rescued migrants in distress, unmanned drones are the new contactless form of surveillance. Economic researcher Shir Hever has investigated the Israeli presence in the EU and says that the growing use of drones, including those from Israel, has a clear political aim. "Drones cannot rescue anyone and they can only take pictures," he told me. "If an actual armed boat or suspicious looking vessel is approaching, the drone operator alerts a patrol boat, which will arrive at the scene, but if it looks like a leaky refugee boat, the drone operator could always take his time, and the patrol boat will leave too late so that there is no one left to save. This is the key difference and the real reason that the drones are a technological upgrade for the coastguard—it gives them the option to let refugees drown."

Sea-Watch cannot compete with this surveillance capability and is woefully outmatched by the Frontex infrastructure. Weiss told me that the Heron drones sent crystal clear images and information to Frontex

headquarters in Warsaw, while Sea-Watch only had the option of using simple text messages between its planes and headquarters. It hoped to find merchant ships that were willing to pick up refugees, but many were hesitant. An NGO was pitted against a well-resourced entity that was tasked with one of the biggest budgets in the EU.

Israel is a key player in the EU battle to both militarize its borders and deter new arrivals, a policy that hugely accelerated after the massive influx of migrants in 2015, principally due to the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The EU has partnered with leading Israeli defense companies to use its drones, and of course years of experience in Palestine is a key selling point.

In 2020 the EU announced partnerships worth US$91 million with Airbus, Israel Aerospace Industries, and Elbit to use their services to maintain an ongoing drone presence over the Mediterranean. Elbit's Hermes drone and IAI's Heron drone were used during Israel's wars against Gaza since 2008.[5] There's growing competition in drone sales—Turkey's TB2 can carry laser-guided bombs, be placed in a flatbed truck, and costs far less than Israeli or American drones, but Israeli models remain hugely popular.[6] In 2017, Israeli drone manufacturers accounted for 60 percent of the global drone market in the previous three decades.[7]

The use of Israeli drones is only one part of the Frontex infrastructure. Weiss said that his group and the few other NGOs aiming to monitor the central Mediterranean for migrants had an incredibly difficult task because the aim of the EU was not to help those in trouble at sea. Instead, the EU left the refugees to drown or placed them in the hands of the Libyan coast guard, which then took people back to detention centers in Libya—though this is a breach of international law.

The EU started working with the Libyan Coast Guard in 2016. The guards on the so-called Libyan rescue ships, which mostly do not have life vests or speed boats, are allegedly sometimes drunk or use amphetamines. Many are forced to make money from people smuggling. Frontex sends migrant boat coordinates to Libyan officers via WhatsApp and claims that this does not represent formal content but emergency communication.[8] Frontex also sends surveillance footage to the Italian Coast Guard and Italy's Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, which both share this information with the Libyans.[9]

I asked Frontex about its relationship with Libyan authorities, and it denied it even existed: “Frontex has never engaged in any direct cooperation with Libyan authorities and does not cooperate with the Libyan Coast Guard.”

Sea-Watch has little valuable communication with the Tripoli-based Libyan rescue coordination center because they rarely answer or speak English. These Libyan forces are trained and equipped by the EU. I have seen horrific videos shot by Sea-Watch of the Libyan Coast Guard forcing exhausted migrants to use a rope to climb onto their ship despite the dangers in doing so. Migrants often drown due to carbon monoxide poisoning or chemical burns (when fuel canisters mix with salt water and become dangerous). Rubber or plastic boats are the most vulnerable to capsizing. Another incident, on June 30, 2021, showed the Libyan Coast Guard firing weapons toward a nearby rubber boat in the Malta search-and-rescue zone in the Mediterranean. On that occasion, the boat eventually made it safely to the island of Lampedusa in southern Italy.

Frontex consistently denies any illegal activities, but Sea-Watch witnesses these realities every day, using aircraft and a few ships to document the ways in which refugees are dying due to willful blindness by Frontex and its Libyan partners. A common occurrence is Sea-Watch using its own aircraft, observing a drone above and, soon after, the Libyan Coast Guard arriving to take the migrants back to Libya, where they face the possibility of torture, rape, or even death. “Without EU aerial surveillance, the Libyan Coast Guard would be practically blind,” Weiss pointed out. Frontex relies solely on aerial surveillance and never uses ships, showing that sea rescues are not its priority. European and British companies such as DEA Aviation are contracted to provide the surveillance planes with multimillion euro contracts.

The idea of drones dropping lifeboats into the water is technically possible, Weiss told me, but unless many drones were used it would be useless to assist in the rescue of a one-hundred-person boat. Sea-Watch has considered dropping lifeboats but believed it might cause migrant distress on the water. Wind also made it an imprecise method. Weiss believed that Frontex would in the future be relying less on drones and instead work with satellites for greater accuracy.[10] Human Rights Watch condemned Frontex in August 2022 for colluding with Libyan officials and using “aerial assets,” such as drones, run by private companies.[11]

Israel's Hermes drones have also been used by the European Maritime Safety Agency, another body tasked to monitor seas and coastlines. Iceland became the first European nation in 2019 to deploy Elbit's Hermes drone for surveillance over its territory. In early 2020, a Hermes drone being controlled by Elbit and Portuguese contractor CEiiA crashed on a runway in Crete as it was set to perform surveillance of Greece's maritime borders. The Hermes is capable of carrying up to four life rafts under its wings but it has not been so deployed in the Mediterranean.

When asked why it started using drones, Frontex told me that they're "used for aerial surveillance purposes. They don't carry any weapon systems but cameras and support saving lives search and rescue operations. The drones allow Frontex to perform border surveillance and support rescue operations for longer periods of time. When planes have to return to base because of fuel limits or crew limitations, drones can operate much longer."

The impact of Frontex using drones to locate refugees has caused the loss of many lives at sea. And that's exactly the point. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in October 2021 that the EU would not fund "barbed wire and walls" to keep out migrants, although that was exactly what it had done in a number of nations, including Greece and Libya.[12]

Frontex disputes this analysis. "In any potential search and rescue, the priority for Frontex is to save lives," they told me. "In the Central Mediterranean region, this means that any time a Frontex plane spots a boat in distress, it immediately alerts the relevant Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres in the region: Italy and Malta, as well as Libya and Tunisia if the boat in distress is in their search and rescue region … Since 2015, Frontex helped to save more than 350,000 lives at sea, including in the Central Mediterranean region. So far this year [2021], Frontex assisted in rescuing 5,111 people in need in this area."

During an investigation for the UK *Observer* newspaper in 2019, I worked alongside journalists Daniel Howden and Apostolis Fotiadis to investigate the growing reliance by Frontex on drones and planes in the Mediterranean. What we reported was that Frontex headquarters in Warsaw was able to access the live visual feed from these planes or drones of migrants bobbing, moving, or drowning in the sea.[13]

This was a deliberate choice, and not an accidental outcome, of an increasingly harsh policy. Frontex policy had particular relevance to events in the waters off Libya, where, for an entire year before our story's publication, not a single EU rescue mission had taken place in one of the deadliest stretches of water in the world. By this time, charity search-and-rescue boats had been chased out of the Mediterranean by either the EU or member states opposed to refugees. As we wrote in the *Observer*: "The switch to drones is part of an apparent effort to monitor the Mediterranean without being pulled into rescue missions that deliver migrants to European shores."

The Mediterranean region is a deadly area, where, according to the International Organisation of Migration Missing Migrants project, at least 22,748 people have died since 2014, including at least 848 children. But these horrific figures have made the EU even more determined to keep them out and make their journeys more unsafe. European weapons companies such as Airbus, BAE Systems, and Leonardo contributed to mass displacement by selling arms that worsened conflict in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Turkey.[14] This was a vicious feedback loop where the EU was determined to keep migrants out with increasingly brutal tactics, but many of the people trying to get in had been negatively impacted due to European defense equipment.[15]

Despite the atrocious human rights record of Frontex, there was some internal dissent. Its head, Fabrice Leggeri, and two of his colleagues resigned in 2022 after being investigated by the EU's anti-fraud agency. Leggeri was accused of covering up human rights violations, and there was growing disquiet among some parts of the EU of the Frontex obsession with illegal push-back of migrants.

The EU spent at least US$3.7 billion since 2015 on high-tech research to find the most efficient ways to digitally and physically target migrants. The EU provided training in Africa, the Middle East, and Balkans in sophisticated surveillance techniques. Police in Algeria and Morocco were trained in how to spread disinformation online and harvest personal information from Face book.[16]

The EU is investing billions of dollars in a program to develop new weapons and technology for both EU and non-EU states to compete with the defense powerhouses of Israel, the US, and China. The ultimate aim was

to end the EU's reliance on Israeli and US drones and develop an indigenous drone fleet.[17] Agreed in late 2020, the Orwellian-named European Peace Facility was sold as boosting Europe's ability to defend itself in the face of declining American power and interest.[18]

Israeli equipment is a central, though far from the only, part of how Europe views its defense and security future. It was announced in 2021 that the Jewish state would be allowed to join the EU's primary program for backing innovation and research, Horizon Europe, for seven years, with a value of €95.5 billion. Israel has also been strongly backed in the past. Funded work as part of Horizon 2020, the EU's innovation and research program between 2014 and 2020, included Israeli high-tech border control systems and surveillance.[19] This backing was mendacious because the EU did not officially recognize the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and any money obtained by Israel was not allowed to be spent in the occupied territories. It falsely presumed that there was a political separation between Israel and the West Bank, when Israel viewed them as one undivided country.

However, according to research by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) think-tank, the EU and its member states have barely done anything since 2013, when the EU introduced a clause for any new contracts with Israel stipulating that the settlements be excluded, to enforce this stricture. Instead, "A majority of European bilateral agreements with Israel potentially benefit its settlements, their companies, and residents—including with regard to social security, taxation provisions, and burgeoning cooperation in research and development areas. Of the more than 260 agreements reviewed by ECFR, few contain a definition of their territorial scope. Those that do often have vague or ambiguous clauses, including definitions of Israeli territory according to 'the laws of the State of Israel' or 'the territory where it levies taxation'—descriptions that could justify the inclusion of Israeli settlements."[20]

One former Horizon advisory board member, political scientist and philosopher Peter Burgess, explained in 2015 that the border industrial complex had undue influence over the project. "Refugees are seen as targets and goals to be registered," he said.[21] A number of critics have said that Horizon hiring independent ethicists to assess projects is little more than

rubber-stamping corporate-led ideas that should not be assessed in the first place.

Nevertheless, there was huge money to be made. The EU is Israel's biggest trading partner, accounting for more than 29 percent of its trade in goods in 2020. In tandem, the Frontex budget surged from €6 million in 2006 to €460 million in 2020, rising again to €543 million in 2021. The EU pledged to spend €34.9 billion for border and migration management between 2021 and 2027. The global migrant population accelerated by more than 80 percent between 2000 and 2020 with an estimated 281 million international migrants, 3.5 percent of the world's population.

The border surveillance industrial complex was excited about the surging Frontex budget (and globally, the industry was estimated to be worth around US$68 billion by 2025[22]). With a proposed staff of 10,000 by 2027 (there was only 45 employees in 2005), the defense and surveillance industries saw both a financial and ideological alignment with EU policies that aimed to push migrants back to their own countries or just out of the EU, regardless of the potential dangers.

There were countless stories of migrant deaths on the Mediterranean. One of the most chilling occurred in April 2021, when up to 130 people were left to die by EU and Libyan authorities off the Libyan coast in a storm despite both groups being constantly told of their presence. Alarm Phone, a hotline for migrants in distress in the EU, reported that "once more, these events show that death at sea is not an accident but the outcome of actions and inactions taken by European and Libyan actors."[23]

The Associated Press summed up the mood in a June 2021 report: "In a post-pandemic Europe, migrants will face a digital fortress." The story explained how the EU and its member states were implementing a suite of new policies aimed to deter refugees, including digital barriers, observation towers, a steel wall, "sound cannon" to deafen arrivals, virtual border-guard interview machines, and lie detectors powered by artificial intelligence.[24] Frontex had been "transformed" from a "coordination mechanism to a full-fledged multinational security force."[25]

Patrick Breyer, a European lawmaker with the German Pirate Party, took the EU to court to uncover the secrets of its AI-powered lie detection systems. "What we are seeing at the borders, and in treating foreign nationals generally, is that it's often a testing field for technologies that are

later used on Europeans as well," he told the Associated Press. "And that's why everybody should care, in their own self-interest."[26] It was an eerily familiar argument; Palestinians were the guinea pigs for Israeli technology and surveillance and the EU viewed this as an achievement to be copied in its own territory.

Across the European Union, evasive Israeli-built technology is ubiquitous, though it largely passes without comment despite some of the companies involved having a troubling record. Hungary and Bulgaria both flirted with the idea of using Israeli companies to build walls on their borders in 2015, admiring how Israel repelled Africans along its 245 miles of border with Egypt, and while in the end they both went with local construction companies, Israel was cited as a model to be copied.

The Israeli surveillance firm Cellebrite has sold its digital data extraction devices to at least 150 countries, including dictatorships such as Russia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Spying on asylum seekers in the EU is partially provided by Cellebrite because a mobile phone is a key part of any migrant's possession. According to a Cellebrite salesperson in 2019, 77 percent of refugees arrived in the EU without documents, and 43 percent had a smartphone during their journey. The company claimed that this opened the door to their technology being used to determine the migrant's journey and their recent geographical and communication history.[27] However, a forensic analysis of a phone may breach international law due to the lack of consent given by the migrant (and in most cases, they're completely unaware it's even happening).

This did not stop Frontex developing a guidebook to detail the ways in which encrypted messaging apps on refugee mobile phones could be cracked and information gleaned, including the use of "special measures," but it was unclear if this referred to applying pressure on the migrant or some other form of technical procedure. In contrast, border guards in Greece and Croatia destroyed the mobile phones of migrants before rejecting any asylum claims and violently pushing them back.[28] This is all potentially illegal behavior. Britain's Home Office admitted in 2022 that confiscating refugees' phones was illegal despite having done so many times.

Frontex is a secretive body with little accountability. Between 2017 and 2019, it held at least seventeen meetings with lobbyists from 108 defense

manufacturers, including Israeli firm Shilat Optronics (a company working on perimeter security that partners with the IDF), as well as the Israeli companies Seraphim Optronics (autonomous surveillance systems) and Elbit (which had at least two meetings in 2018). PowerPoint presentations were shown that promoted the advantages of surveillance drones.[29]

The topics of these conversations included ammunition and guns, aerial surveillance, and document inspection systems. The result of the meetings was clear, with many firms, including Elbit, Leonardo, and Airbus, securing multimillion-euro contracts. Frontex leased its own equipment, no longer requiring member states to contribute, and this turbo charged arms companies' interest. Israeli corporations were far from the only entities keen to partner with Frontex, but their influence was significant.

Frontex renewed a contract with Israeli company Windward in 2020, which makes a maritime analysis tool that the firm promotes as being able to catch the "bad guys" at sea. The company had received investor support from retired US general and former head of the CIA David Petraeus, and former Israeli chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi was an advisor. Founded by two Israeli former navy intelligence officers in 2010, it used digital aggregation, vessel tracking evaluation, and maritime surveil-lance data to track ships in the ocean.[30]

The former Libyan justice minister Salah Marghani explained that the EU-led program, of which Israeli drones are a key element, was all about trying to keep European hands clean. "Make Libya the bad guy," he said. "Make Libya the disguise for their [the EU's] policies while the good humans of Europe say they are offering money to help make this hellish system safer."[31] Frontex officers deploy to non-EU states as EU borders expand politically if not geographically. Human Rights Watch condemned Frontex for its "pattern of failure to credibly investigate or take steps to mitigate abuses against migrants at EU external borders."[32]

The EU has a refugee processing center in the desperately poor African state of Niger, an unstable nation that's experienced four coups since independence in 1960. It is a migration laboratory where the EU funds a facility to funnel and often stop the migrant path toward Europe. The EU wants to reduce the number of migrants leaving Niger and making their way to Libya (after which they attempt to get to Europe). The country has been turned into a hub for Western military, diplomatic, and political

maneuverings, including a major US base near Agadez, to both deter refugees and manage regional Islamist insurgencies.[33]

The EU commitment to human rights, an oft-repeated mantra, has always been highly selective. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Brussels was desperate to stop buying Russian gas because it opposed Moscow's brutal actions. The EU announced in June 2022, at a meeting in Cairo with European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen alongside the Egyptian and Israeli energy ministers, that it was a "special moment" and the beginning of a new relationship. "Significant" Israeli gas would soon be exported to Europe. The EU said that it would increase its energy independence while willfully ignoring its reliance on autocratic Egypt and occupying Israel. The message is clear: the Russian occupation of Ukraine is bad, but Israeli occupation of Palestine is completely fine.

Greece is the nation in Europe most militarily engaged with Israel. It's a country at the border of the continent and determined to seal its own borders while making life as miserable as possible for those who get through. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was upset when a journalist asked him in November 2021 about his country's policy towards refugees. "We have a tough but a fair policy in migration," he said. He claimed that his country's actions had "been saving hundreds if not thousands of people at sea."

Since 2013, Greece has steadily increased its reliance on both Israeli defense equipment and training. According to research done for me with both Greek and English documents by Disinfaux Collective, a nonprofit group based in Greece, Israeli companies such as Israel Aerospace Industries, Elbit, and Raphael have secured large contracts to work with the Greek state. Drones, helicopters, rockets, and bombs were just part of the package.

It was so concerning that the Israeli-Palestinian NGO Combatants of Peace wrote to the Greek, Cypriot, and EU leaderships in May 2020 to warn them against training their forces in Israel in light of what was then feared might be the imminent illegal Israeli annexation of the West Bank. Although formal annexation never happened, the letter said that it was

> inconceivable that armed forces of EU member states will conduct military training in the occupied territories and take an active part in the deportation and dispossession of the Palestinian population living near the closed military training areas in the Jordan Valley or

> any other part of the West Bank … it is clear that any annexation must render null and void the aforementioned agreements for the military training of the Cypriot and Greek armed forces in the territory of the State of Israel, as the territory would unlawfully include parts of the West Bank.

Israel, Greece, and Cyprus continued to work closely together, holding naval drills in the Mediterranean in 2021 and deepening their involvement across a range of defense sectors.

The Greek authorities, it seemed, viewed their country's critical citizens as fair game for Israeli cyber-meddling. An investigative journalist who worked for CNN Greece, Thanasis Koukakis, was targeted in 2021 by the Israeli company Intellexa after his reporting on a major government corruption scandal. Prominent politicians and other journalists were also victims of Israeli spyware. After Intellexa's surveillance was exposed, he wrote in *Haaretz* that there was an immediate need for "opaque" Israeli firms to be thoroughly investigated by parliamentary oversight and independent bodies to determine "if there really are national security reasons that put anyone—journalist or non-journalist —under surveillance."[34]

An activist in Athens told me that the Greek spending spree on shiny new defense equipment was not wholly necessary, but Greece "often buys defense equipment to show their voters that they have everything. It will likely start using them when they have capacity to do so."

The left-wing Syriza party led Greece from 2015 to 2019, during which time ties with Israel continued, and the relationship deepened during the leadership of New Democracy Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after his election win in 2019. His father, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, had been the first Greek leader to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1990. "One can go as far as to say that perhaps the only thing that all successive Greek governments of the last decade agreed upon was the importance of being allies with Israel," wrote the chairman of the Israel-Greece Chamber of Commerce in 2021.[35] This partnership was cemented in 2021 with the biggest ever defense deal between the two nations, worth US$1.65 billion, for Elbit to run a training center for the Greek air force. An even deeper reliance on Greece was proposed by a representative of Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz in 2022, when he suggested that Greek islands should be bought "to create a haven for the Jewish people in case of emergency, as a place for Jewish refugees in times of war."[36]

At times the Israel–Greek relationship dripped in hypocrisy. The Israeli embassy in Greece announced in 2017 that it would donate its budget intended for Israel's Independence Day for medical equipment on the Greek island of Chios to help tourists and refugees. The donation was promoted as an initiative of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs called "helping friends who help." While Israel claimed that "donating equipment is a joy for us," it was also willing to assist Greece and the EU with surveillance equipment and drones in reducing the number of refugees being able to find safety on the Greek islands. Greece established a drone base on Skyros island, in the center of the Aegean Sea, and Israeli-leased Heron drones became a key part of the country's armed forces. The Heron drone was also used in fighting wildfires, including during the horrific fires across Greece in August 2021.

The not-so-dirty secret is that Greece is doing the EU's bidding and working tirelessly to monitor, punish, isolate, and violently repress refugees, stopping most of them from entering the continent. Frontex quietly supports it. Greece has constructed a network of detention centers on the Greek islands and initiated illegal pushbacks at border crossings and on the Mediterranean. More than 41,000 migrants since 2020 were illegally pushed back, according to the Turkey's Ombudsman Institution report in 2022, with Greece deploying a range of technological innovations to deter new arrivals.[37] During the opening of Greece's "closed controlled access center" in Kos in November 2021, two Greek Orthodox priests blessed the facility while EU politicians looked on. Their view was barbed wire, police, and turnstiles. In 2022, the EU agreed to fund even more surveillance on Greece's land and sea borders, which included Israeli drones, police dogs, and helicopters.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called Greece the "shield" of Europe in 2020 when giving Greece €700 million more to tackle border security. The Greek solution to migrants was completing a forty-kilometer wall and surveillance system along its land border with Turkey in August 2021.[38] At the Evros land border with Turkey, Greece uses deafening long-range sound cannons to scare refugees. Although only the size of a small TV set, it emits sounds as loud as an airplane or shotgun blasted right next to the ear. It can cause permanent hearing damage. Greece purchased the devices from US company Genasys, and they have been deployed by law enforcement officers around the world. Lawyer Evgenia

Kouniaki, who monitors the Evros border, told *Coda* in 2021 that the Greek government was on a buying spree of high-tech repression equipment because "they want to satisfy their voting public. Now, in Greece, refugees have no rights. It's the darkest period that I've seen as a refugee lawyer."[39]

The growth of Israeli influence in Europe presents a curious historical milestone and an unresolved contradiction. After the annihilation of Jews in the Holocaust, Germany has become the most consistently pro-Israel nation on the continent and is Israel's biggest trading partner in Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Israel in October 2021 on one of her final overseas visits before leaving office; it was her eighth trip during her sixteen years in power. She did not travel to the West Bank or Gaza. She praised the Jewish state, despite acknowledging that Israel did not embrace her favored two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, but this did not matter because "the topic of Israel's security will always be of central importance and a central topic of every German government."

It was an emotional connection, Merkel stressed, and one rooted in historical reconciliation and forgiveness. "The fact that Jewish life has found a home again in Germany after the crimes of humanity of the Shoah is an immeasurable sign of trust, for which we are grateful," she wrote in the guest book at Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial.

The Palestine laboratory can only thrive if enough nations believe in its underlying premise. It's unsurprising that repressive regimes want to mimic Israeli repression, using Israeli technology to oppress their own unwanted or restive populations, but the Jewish state craves Western approval to fully realize its diplomatic and military potential. Aside from the US, Germany is arguably the greatest prize of all. Israel helped Germany rehabilitate its shattered image after World War II, while Berlin grants legitimacy to a country that brutally occupies the Palestinians (a nonpeople in the eyes of successive German governments). Germany purchasing increasing amounts of Israeli defense equipment is just one way it can atone for its historical guilt. When Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas visited Germany in August 2022 and spoke alongside Chancellor Olaf Scholz, he accused Israel of committing "fifty Holocausts" against his people. The German establishment expressed outrage over the comment but the hypocrisy was clear; the Palestinians are under endless occupation but it's only they who have to apologize.

Germany has taken its love affair with Israel to dangerous, even absurd heights. The Deutsche Welle media organization updated its code of conduct in 2022 and insisted that all employees, when speaking on behalf of the organization or even in a personal capacity, must "support the right of Israel to exist" or face punishment, likely dismissal.[40] After the Israeli military shot dead Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in the West Bank city of Jenin in May 2022, German police banned a peaceful public vigil in Berlin because of what German authorities called an "immediate risk" of violence and anti-Semitic messaging. When protestors ignored this request and took to the streets to both commemorate Abu Akleh and Nakba Day, police arrested 170 people for expressing solidarity with Palestine.

A Palestinian in Germany, Majed Abusalama, tweeted that he had been assaulted by the police. "I just left the hospital an hour ago with an arm sling to hold my shoulder after the German racist police almost dislocated my shoulder with their violent actions to us wearing Palestine Kuffiyas," he wrote. "This is the new wave of anti-Palestinian everything in Berlin. Insane, right?"

This followed years of anti-Palestinian incitement by the German political elite, from the German Parliament designating the BDS movement as anti-Semitic in 2019 to pressuring German institutions to refuse any space for pro-Palestinian voices, Jewish or Palestinian.[41] The Palestinian intellectual Tariq Baconi gave a powerful speech in Berlin in May 2022 at a conference titled "Hijacking Memory: The Holocaust and the New Right." He noted that "states like Germany have once again accepted Palestinians as collateral. Their oppression and colonization is a fair price to pay to allow Germany to atone for its past crimes."

"The Israeli government, in partnership with the German right, has been allowed to define how Germans should atone for their genocidally antisemitic past," argues American-Jewish writer Peter Beinart. "The Israeli government and its German allies have told Germans that because their ancestors murdered Jews they must defend the Jewish state. That's analytically and morally wrong."[42]

Despite the constant pledges of German loyalty as a trusted friend of Israel, anti-Semitism was rising across Europe and growing numbers of Jews were worried about the future for themselves and their religion in the coming decades. Violent attacks against Jews, rabbis violently abused,

swastikas drawn on synagogues, and cemeteries desecrated were indications of the growing storm. There were 3,027 recorded anti-Semitic incidents in 2021, up 29 percent from the previous year. The far right was mostly to blame, alongside Islamists.

Muslims also suffered greatly, with 632 Islamophobic crimes in Germany alone from January to November 2020. The majority of European Jews, according to a study released in 2022 by the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research, believed that "remembering the Holocaust" and "combating anti-Semitism" were the most essential elements of their European Jewish identity.[43]

Forty-one percent of young Jews in Europe had considered emigrating due to security fears, according to a 2018 survey by the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2,700 Jews aged between 16 and 34 said that they considered leaving "because they did not feel safe living there as a Jewish person." 45 percent refused to wear any identifiable signs of their faith in public. A majority expressed "strong attachment" to Israel with only 35 percent claiming support for the European Union. Jews were interviewed in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Britain.[44]

Despite these concerns, few Western European Jews moved to Israel. In 2020, 20,000 Jews emigrated to Israel from seventy countries, but only around 5,500 were from Western Europe. Many more came from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. This mattered because the Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in October 2021 that his "goal is to bring 500,000 Jewish immigrants from the strong communities in the US, South America and France." It was a direct rejection of the ongoing waves of immigration from non-Western states, highlighting the deeply embedded racism that discriminated against populations that are viewed as a heavier burden on the state due to their potential reliance on welfare.

"Those 20,000 people who immigrate to Israel from Eastern Europe every year are lucky if the state even gives them the courtesy to call themselves Jews," wrote Israeli journalist Liran Friedmann. "It is hard to be proud of so many immigrants from Moscow, Tashkent or Minsk, who have done so much for the state but aren't as cool and hip as their Jewish peers from Paris or New York."[45]

The worrying signs of anti-Semitism across Europe are arguably being worsened by Israeli actions in Palestine. This is not to justify them, but merely to explain what happens whenever there is a surge in violence in the West Bank, Gaza, or East Jerusalem. During the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, there was a slew of anti-Semitic attacks across Europe, from throwing rocks at a synagogue in Bonn to a convoy of cars in North London shouting anti-Jewish slogans, with a small number of people deliberately conflating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitic actions and words.

Israel's alliance with Europe's border-industrial security complex has the potential to complicate the Jewish state's relationship with the continent. Public opinion across Europe is steadily turning against Israel and the 2021 Israel and Gaza war only accelerated this trend. According to polling by YouGov Eurotrack in June 2021, Israel's favorability dived in Britain, France, and Denmark. In contrast, polling conducted by the EU Neighbours South project in 2020 found a majority of Israelis believed that they shared values with the EU and should cooperate.

This disconnect was real, with Israelis largely in support of EU backing while many in the EU were increasingly worried about the Jewish state's actions toward the Palestinians. There is a proportion of Europe's right wing that admires and backs Israeli actions in Palestine, supporting its ethno nationalism and uncompromising stance against Islam and refugees, keen to buy and get inspiration from the tools and techniques used to maintain its Jewish-majority state. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thus cultivated alliances with hard-line, pro-Israel nationalists in Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic.

Nonetheless, a Pew Research Center survey in 2018 found that citizens in many Western European nations, including Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Greece, and Italy supported the acceptance of refugees who had fled violence and war.[46] Although anti-refugee sentiment was an undeniable reality in other countries, the EU's brutal policy to keep out refugees, assisted by Israeli technology, had no discernible public backing in many EU populations. Where this left European Jews who supported the idea of Israel and what it represented was less clear.

The EU's anti-refugee stance was led by politicians and bureaucrats who embraced the "clash of civilizations" narrative that pitted Muslims and

black Africans against the supposedly “more civilized” European majority. It was an argument warmly welcomed in Israel.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 ensured an even deeper EU relationship with Israel. When Germany under Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced an extra €100 billion for its defense needs to bolster security in the wake of Moscow’s aggression, part of the wish list was armed Israeli drones. The German air force announced that it was looking to purchase Israeli anti-missile technology to protect it from Russian aggression. Finland, another country worried about Moscow’s militarism, was set to purchase Israeli anti-aircraft equipment. NATO states sent anti-tank weapons to Ukraine that were built by a German subsidiary of Israel’s Rafael Advanced Defence Systems. “War is hell but clearly it is good for business,” wrote a former chief lobbyist for the powerful pro-Israel US lobby group, AIPAC.[47]

5

The Enduring Appeal of Israeli Domination

If the sheriffs in the United States have one thing in common with the Israelis, they are not polite. They are straight talkers.

Colonel Dany Tirza, architect of the West Bank wall

The contradiction at the heart of the Jewish state has had little impact on its success. Nonetheless, being Jewish in Israel is far more dangerous than living as a Jew in almost any other place on earth. This lack of safety is not because of Judaism but because of the political and military posture of the nation.

"It is a democracy in which one must be Jewish to enjoy full civic rights," writes filmmaker, photographer, and scholar Haim Bresheeth-Žabner in his 2020 book *An Army Like No Other: How the Israel Defense Forces Made a Nation*. "Zionism has marked the move away from many small European, Jewish ghettos to a modern, large and powerful ghetto setting itself apart. This particular ghetto has failed in its utopian project of building a Jewish existence without the goy [non-Jew]."[1]

This can be seen in Israel's relationship with Africa. Many African states had backed Israel after 1948 as a noble anticolonial struggle. They related to its cause. One of the least known aspects of this dynamic, just before the Six-Day War, was Israel's support for the campaign against white minority rule in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Israel condemned the regime led by white nationalist Ian Smith after his unilateral declaration of

independence in 1965 and supported a military and civilian boycott of the regime.

But Israel's advocacy was not due to a love of African self-determination but was rather a calculated decision to gather support in Africa against what it perceived as Arab and communist "defamation." Israel was also interested in exploiting Africa's natural resources and immediately set about building relationships with pliant leaders in the Central African Republic after it declared independence from France in 1960.[2]

Declassified documents from Israel's State Archives indicate that Israel provided training to rebel groups fighting racism in Rhodesia, though the exact nature of the training is unknown, and some officials backed armed struggle. Israel's ambassador to Zambia, Ben Zion Tahan, sent a telegram on November 23, 1965, that was unequivocal: "In my opinion, terrorism is the main way, although it is the most difficult for the fighters."[3] When the first leader of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, visited Israel in 1964, he thanked the Jewish state for its support of his resistance movement and expressed a desire for his fighters to get Israeli training in guerrilla warfare.

After 1967, Israel's interest in liberation movements waned and its support for them became far less effective as it turned into an occupier itself. However, there was no better political, military, diplomatic, and ideological alliance between like-minded nations than Israel and apartheid South Africa. The apartheid regime in Pretoria took power in 1948 and soon put in place Nazi-style restrictions on nonwhites, from forbidding marriage between the races to barring blacks from many jobs. The South African Jewish community was strongly pro-Israel and became the biggest financial backer of Israel per capita after 1948. A majority of these Jews benefited from South African apartheid and supported its continuation. A small but notable minority bravely opposed it and joined the African National Congress (ANC) in its campaign for liberation.

By the time the South African and Israeli governments cemented a political, ideological, and military relationship in the 1970s, often centered on weapons that had been developed and tested by the Israeli military, many in the ruling Israeli Likud party felt an affinity with South Africa's worldview. As journalist and author of *The Unspoken Alliance* Sasha Polakow-Suransky writes, it was an "ideology of minority survivalism that

presented the two countries as threatened outposts of European civilisation defending their existence against barbarians at the gate.[4]

One of those prominent Jewish dissidents was Ronnie Kasrils, who served as the minister for intelligence between 2004 and 2008 under an ANC government. He told the *Guardian* that the comparison between the two nations wasn't accidental. "Israelis claim that they are the chosen people, the elect of God, and find a biblical justification for their racism and Zionist exclusivity," he said. "This is just like the Afrikaners of apartheid South Africa, who also had the biblical notion that the land was their God-given right. Like the Zionists who claimed that Palestine in the 1940s was 'a land without people for a people without land,' so the Afrikaner settlers spread the myth that there were no black people in South Africa when they first settled in the 17th century. They conquered by force of arms and terror and the provocation of a series of bloody colonial wars of conquest."[5]

The relationship became so close by the mid-1970s that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin invited South African Prime Minister John Vorster to visit, including a tour of Yad Vashem, the country's Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Vorster had been a Nazi sympathizer and member of the fascist Afrikaner group Ossewabrandwag during World War II. In 1942, he proudly expressed his admiration for Nazi Germany. Yet when Vorster arrived in Israel in 1976, he was feted by Rabin at a state dinner. Rabin toasted "the ideals shared by Israel and South Africa: the hopes for justice and peaceful coexistence." Both nations faced "foreign-inspired instability and recklessness."

A few months after Vorster's visit, the South African government yearbook explained that both states were facing the same challenge: "Israel and South Africa have one thing above all else in common: they are both situated in a predominantly hostile world inhabited by dark peoples."[6] The relationship between the nations was broad but also sworn to secrecy. In April 1975, a security agreement was signed that defined the relationship for the next twenty years. A clause within the deal stated that both parties pledged to keep its existence concealed.

Alon Liel, a former Israeli ambassador to Pretoria and head of Israel's foreign ministry's South Africa desk in the 1980s, said that the Israeli and South African relationship was vital for both country's defense industries, turning them into major global players. Liel argued that many in the Israeli

security establishment convinced themselves that Israel as an occupying nation could not have survived without Afrikaner support. Liel and another former Israeli ambassador to South Africa, llan Baruch, wrote in 2021 that Israel was an apartheid state that took inspiration from pre-1994 South Africa.

"We created the South African arms industry," Liel explained. "They assisted us to develop all kinds of technology because they had a lot of money. When we were developing things together we usually gave the know-how and they gave the money. After 1976, there was a love affair between the security establishments of the two countries and their armies. We were involved in Angola [South Africa never recognized the country's 1975 independence and supported its opponents] as consultants to the [South African] army. You had Israeli officers there cooperating with the army. The link was very intimate."[7]

Israel ignored the UN Security Council–imposed arms embargo on South Africa while telling the world that it was complying. The deputy director of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hanan Bar-On, sent a telegram to the ministry director, David Kimchi, on August 29, 1984, to explain: "The Israeli policy … is that we do not in any way admit [such sales] to an Israeli or to a foreign actor and certainly not to an American Congressman, even if he is considered a friend and the relationship with him is supposedly intimate."

The most secretive aspect of the relationship was the mutual support given to each other's nuclear capability. France and Britain provided essential materials in assisting Israel develop nuclear weapons and full-scale production began after the Six-Day War. With an abundant supply of uranium, South Africa had a solid base on which to build its own stockpile, but Israel provided technical expertise. According to former Israeli intelligence officer Ari Ben-Menashe, South Africa allowed Israel to test nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean in 1979, though Israel denied doing so.[8] Israel even offered to sell nuclear warheads to South Africa in the 1970s (in a deal that never went ahead).[9]

Declassified documents indicate that South Africa wanted the weapons to potentially hit neighboring states, as a deterrent from attack. South African Prime Minister P. W. Botha and Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres colluded in an agreement to keep the deal completely secret. A 1974

letter from Peres to South Africa claimed that they both had a “common hatred of injustice” and he pushed for a “close identity of aspirations and interests.” By the 1980s, Israel was South Africa’s main arms supplier.

Washington was not initially fully aware of the extent of Israel’s nuclear collaboration with South Africa, and Israel secretiveness continues to this day; its nuclear facility at Dimona has never been inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Israel is presumed to have more than two hundred nuclear weapons. During the first meeting between US President Joe Biden and then Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett in August 2021, Washington reaffirmed the long-standing understanding that Washington would not pressure Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or to give up its weapons. Israel agreed not to conduct any nuclear tests or threaten nuclear strikes while maintaining its “nuclear ambiguity.”[10]

In 1971, the *New York Times* columnist C. L. Sulzberger wrote that Israel and South Africa had become so close that he had heard an unconfirmed rumor that “a South African mission flew to Israel during the Six-Day War to study tactics and use of weapons.” South African Prime Minister Vorster told the columnist that Israel faced its own “apartheid problem,” namely how to manage the Arabs. “Neither nation,” wrote Sulzberger, “wants to place its future entirely in the hands of a surrounding majority and would prefer to fight.”[11] Sulzberger was accused in 1977 of being a CIA agent by Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*’s Watergate reporting team.[12]

The mutually beneficial relationship was not just about the ability to make money from the defense sector. It was an ideological affinity about how to treat unwanted populations. South Africa’s Bantustans, areas where black residents lived without autonomy, inspired many in the Israeli elite as a viable model for Palestine. This was the desire to isolate “undesirable” Palestinians in noncontiguous enclaves, Bantustans cut off from the rest of the country—in other words, like today’s West Bank, where 165 Palestinians “enclaves” are strangulated by Israeli colonies, the IDF, and violent settlers.

During the apartheid South African era, Israeli diplomats were instructed around the world to tell the media that the Jewish state didn’t recognize the Bantustans. This was a lie, as a telegram by the deputy director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Natan Meron, on November 23,

1983, proved: “It is no secret that Israeli political figures and public figures are involved in one way or another, directly or indirectly, in economic activity in the Bantustans.”[13]

Using South African apartheid–era rhetoric to defend the Israeli occupation remains alive to this day. During the 2019 Israeli election campaign, opposition leader Benny Gantz criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for banning US Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from entering Israel and the Palestinian territories. Instead, Gantz said, both women should have been allowed to see “with their own eyes” that “the best place to be an Arab in the Middle East is in Israel … and the second-best place to be an Arab in the Middle East is the West Bank.” This was reminiscent of South African apart-heid leader John Vorster statement to the *New York Times* in 1977 that “the standard of living of the South African Black is two to five times higher than that of any Black country in Africa.”[14] One of the architects of apartheid in South Africa, former prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd, wrote in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1961 that “Israel, like South Africa, is an apart-heid state” after taking Palestine from the Arabs who “had lived there for a thousand years.”[15]

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was a known fan of Bantustans, and he was one of the biggest advocates of settlement construction in Israeli settlements from the 1970s and wanted to adapt them into the West Bank. Former Israeli ambassador Avi Primor wrote in his autobiography about a trip to South Africa in the early 1980s with then Defense Minister Sharon and recalls how much Sharon was taken by the Bantustanenterprise.[16] Former Italian Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema told Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 2003 that Sharon had explained to him that the Bantustan model was the most appropriate for Palestine.[17]

Near the end of South Africa’s apartheid regime and the first democratic election in 1994, Israel was one of the last nations to maintain a relationship with the white minority regime. The Israeli defense establishment had long become entranced by its own propaganda and believed that apartheid would last forever. Nelson Mandela took notice. In a 1993 speech to the delegates of the Socialist International, Mandela said, “The people of South Africa will never forget the support of the state of Israel to the apartheid regime.”[18]

Israel's mission from the beginning was to be a beacon in a century that suffered catastrophically from the perils of ethno-nationalism. Today Israel provides inspiration, ideologically and with military and intelligence equipment, to further its missionary zeal to find and create like-minded countries. None will be the same as Israel, but its model of jingoism and unashamed pride in preferencing Jews above all else, is like an easily transportable flatpack that can be adapted to a multitude of countries and scenarios.

US and Israeli officials are present in many nations around the world, training, arming, or pressuring local officials to enforce their policies on immigration, counterterrorism, and policing. The Global North, including the US, European Union, Australia, and Israel, ruthlessly enforce their power, controlling four-fifths of the world's income, because there's no interest in sharing their wealth.[19] This architecture of control has to be managed at home but also around the globe with reliable client-states. External borders are physically invisible but ideologically powerful. It includes Israel keeping Palestinians in a ghetto, Australia forcibly sending refugees on boats to remote and dangerous Pacific Islands, the EU deliberately allowing nonwhite migrants to drown in the Mediterranean, and the US repelling people from Latin America who are often fleeing policies in their home countries that were designed in Washington.

For India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Kashmir is a clean slate on which a new vision of Indian identity can be imposed. In 2019, Modi's government revoked most of Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution and suspended the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution to give India almost complete control over the disputed territory after seventy years of a degree of limited autonomy. Modi moved quickly to implement a plan with remarkable similarities (but also notable differences) to Israeli-controlledPalestine.[20]

It is a comparison that is not lost on the people most affected. Kashmiri writer Arif Ayaz Parrey believes that Modi's ideal was both philosophical and political. "The nature of the conflicts in Kashmir and Palestine might be poles apart, but essentially, in both places people are being forced to do what they don't want to do and what serves no tangible benefit to them; what is, even from a neutral perspective, a loss," he told me. "In Palestine, it is manifested in the form of loss of land (which will ultimately lead to a

loss of identity) and in Kashmir in the form of loss of identity (which might someday translate into a loss of land). The coercive mechanisms in the two countries are united by this reality."

So much of the writings by Kashmiris when describing their torment and struggles are reminiscent of Palestinians imagining the day when freedom will come. "Our current masters [India] do not even want to exploit us," Parrey wrote in the prelude for the book *Cups of Nun Chai*, about the 118 lives lost during a particularly violent summer in Kashmir in 2010. "They would rather we cease to exist so that they can have an empty land to fill with their fantasies of *swarg*, paradise."[21]

Kashmir's mountain region has rarely seen peace since 1947, when the subcontinent was divided by the departing British administration between the new states of India and Pakistan. In the twenty-first century, the occupations of both Palestine and Kashmir, while equally brutal, receive different degrees of international attention. This was pointed out by Khurram Parvez, coordinator of the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, a group of civil rights organizations, who said in 2020 when Israel threatened to annex the West Bank that "the annexation of Kashmir is as sinister as that of Palestine but we have been forsaken. There appears to be tacit support for Kashmir's annexation … We know the pain of someone else deciding about your land, rights and future."[22] Kashmiris use the term "intifada" to describe their decades-long struggle against Indian rule.

Indian officials do not even try to hide their admiration for Israeli occupation. India's consul general in New York, Sandeep Chakravorty, said at a private event for Kashmiri Hindus in New York in November 2019 that he believed that "the security situation will improve, it will allow the refugees to go back, and in your lifetime, you will be able to go back … and you will be able to find security, because we already have a model in the world. I don't know why we don't follow it. It has happened in the Middle East. If the Israeli people can do it, we can also do it." Modi's administration was "determined" to do so.[23]

The growing ties between Israel and India were represented in raw financial terms. Between 2015 and 2020, Israel's leading weapons export market was India, at 43 percent of total sales, and in 2020 India was Israel's largest purchaser of weaponry. In 2019, Israel was named as the eighth

biggest arms dealer in the world. Israeli Heron drones fly over Kashmir, just as they fly over the Palestinian occupied territories.

The growing affection between Israel and India was not just ideological, a mutual embrace of ethno nationalism—the exchange of defense equipment helped enforce it. India does not need Israel to teach it how to oppress the Kashmiris, but the Jewish state has given the world's biggest democracy the tools and legitimacy to pursue it with extreme prejudice.

And it is not just in Kashmir where India is pursuing Israeli-style policies. In 2022, authorities in the state of Uttar Pradesh demolished the homes of Muslims who were accused of ties to religious protests that turned violent. The sight of bulldozers destroying homes was eerily reminiscent of Israeli actions against Palestinian structures in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Like Israel, India claimed that the homes had been built illegally.

The pro-Israel *Tablet* magazine urged even stronger ties to India because "Israel has the technology and the willingness to act with relative freedom and confidence in confronting threats." The author claimed that India wished for similar freedom, quoting Tanvi Madam, director of the India Project at the Brookings Institution, who said that Indian elites had "operational envy" of Israel "coming from a real frustration … over the last two decades that Pakistan has used these terrorist groups instrumentally but India can't retaliate the way it would with any other country because of the nuclear weapons."[24]

The relationship between the two nations goes back a long way, but it was not always so cozy. India did not recognize Israel until 1950. Years earlier, writing in 1938, Mahatma Gandhi explained that the "cry for the national home of the Jews" was something he opposed. "Palestine belongs to the Arabs," he wrote. Until 1992, therefore, India saw itself as a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement, identifying its own struggle for identity in ideological affinity with Palestine.

After the Oslo peace accords in the 1990s, this dynamic started to shift, with India increasingly interested in buying Israeli weapons, drones, and electronic fences to detect human movement. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited India in September 2003 when BJP predecessor Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in power. They signed the Delhi Statement on Friendship and Cooperation between India and Israel, stating that "Israel

and India are partners in the battle against this [terrorist] scourge" and that "there cannot be any compromise in the war against terrorism."[25]

The growth of mutual respect went hand in hand as Hindu nationalism became dominant. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, the founding father of the Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was an admirer of Nazism. Hindu fundamentalism and hatred of Muslims is at the heart of BJP thinking. A pioneer of this ideology, Veer Savarkar, wrote that India's model for its "Muslim problem" should be how the Nazis managed their "Jewish problem." The RSS has evolved since its founding but an admiration of Nazism remains in some contemporary sections of the party.

However, Hindu nationalists long admired the concept of Israel as an ethno state (even if they didn't like Jews; similar thinking exists today among the global far right). In 1947, Savarkar wrote, "It must be emphasised therefore that speaking historically, the whole of Palestine has been, from at least two thousand years before the birth of the Muslim Prophet, the National Home of the Jewish People."

Today's leadership, who have gained an iron grip on the Indian parliament, is full of praise for Israel. In 2016, the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat expressed his admiration for the Jewish state when he said, "Israel was attacked by surrounding Islamic countries on five occasions, but the Israeli people repulsed their aggressions and extended their boundaries due to strong resolve to save the motherland."[26]

Since Modi's election in 2014, Indian Muslims have suffered a worsening wave of lynchings, violence, threats of ethnic cleansing, and hate speech. The bodies of Kashmiris who are killed are dumped by authorities far away from the victim's family, or simply not returned in a timely manner, in a tactic reminiscent of the IDF. Grieving families are often forced to mourn before empty graves.[27] Muslim women wearing hijabs are attacked, and Muslim girls in some states are denied education because they wear the head covering.

Unsurprisingly, the nation's xenophobia has seeped into popular culture. Bollywood, long known for its extensive Muslim involvement across the entire industry, is being forced to toe the anti-Islam perspective. Many in Bollywood happily pushed the hard-line Hindu nationalist agenda, releasing films that openly celebrated the actions of the Indian armed forces. In a

similar vein, the Israeli series *Fauda*, which features undercover Israeli agents in the West Bank, has been hugely popular among right-wing Indians, looking for a sugar hit of war on terror and anti-Islamist propaganda in a slickly produced format. During the May 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, the right-wing economist Subramanian Swamy, who sits on the BJP national executive, tweeted that he loved *Fauda*.[28]

The post-9/11 "war on terror" suited both India and Israel in their plans to pacify their respective unwanted populations. To this end, Israel trained Indian forces in counterinsurgency. Following a 2014 agreement between Israel and India, pledging to cooperate on "public and homeland security," countless Indian officers, special forces, pilots, and commandoes visited Israel for training. In 2020, Israel refused to screen Indian police officers to determine if they had committed any abuses in India. Israeli human rights advocate Eitay Mack and a range of other activists petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court in 2020 to demand that Israel stop training Indian police officers who "blind, murder, rape, torture and hide civilians in Kashmir." The court rejected the request, and in the words of the three justices, "without detracting from the importance of the issue of human rights violations in Kashmir."

Benjamin Netanyahu and Modi strengthened the relationship during the former's time in office. Israel even granted arms dealers a travel exemption during a Covid lockdown in early 2021 because dozens of Israelis wanted to attend one of the world's biggest weapon's fairs, Aero India. The defense companies charted a private plane to get them there.[29] In 2022, US President Joe Biden, then Israeli prime minister Yair Lapid, Modi, and United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan met in the first meeting of the "I2U2" forum, which aimed to build closer ties between the nations.

A diplomatic incident occurred in November 2022 that went to the heart of the Israel–India relationship. A prominent Israeli filmmaker, Nadav Lapid, the head of the festival jury at the International Film Festival of India, condemned a film in the competition, *The Kashmir Files*, about the persecution of Hindus in Kashmir as "propaganda" and "vulgar." The film had been backed by the Modi government and was a box office hit. In response, Lapid received an avalanche of condemnation from Indian nationalists and Modi officials. The Israeli ambassador to India wrote that Lapid "should be ashamed," worrying that the Indian government might

reduce its backing for the Jewish state. It was a depressing yet revealing moment that showed the parlous state of public debate in both nations around nationalism and terrorism.

Many Indian commentators celebrated Modi's moves in Kashmir, a territory with a population of over 12 million people occupied by around half a million Indian soldiers, openly praising the Israeli response to Palestinians and urging India to follow suit. In August 2019, two weeks after the revocation of Article 370, Abhijit Iyer Mitra wrote in the online outlet *The Print* that Indian officials were being heavy handed by blocking all communications in Kashmir, including telephones and the internet. Instead, he praised Israel for how it managed the so-called Silent Intifada in 2014, during a period of increased violence in Jerusalem, by "getting in before gatherings happened and, in doing so, avoided inconveniencing the Palestinian population as a whole. The root of this was not cutting down on communications but allowing communications to flow freely."[30]

This was a willful misreading of what Israel did during this time, because it enforced its contentious policy in which the houses of suspected militants were destroyed. Human Rights Watch called this policy a "war crime" that "unlawfully punishes people not accused of any wrongdoing."

The comparisons between Kashmir and Israeli settlements in Palestine were obvious. From 2019, for the first time in over a century, non-Kashmiris were allowed to buy property and land in an attempt to change the demographic makeup of the area. Kashmiris feared Indian settlers, civilian or armed, taking over vast tracts of their territory.

The people of Kashmir are suffering from this stifling atmosphere. It's a daily reminder that they are under occupation. Anuradha Bhasin is the executive editor of the *Kashmir Times* and lives in Jammu. "On the surface, life in Jammu remains by and large normal," she told me. "In Srinagar, one has to continuously negotiate the increasing size of the military with bunkers, frisking checkpoints, and fear of being caught in an incident of arson. Internet shutdowns are frequent and restrictions on movement are also sometimes imposed by the security forces. It is psychologically also burdening because one is constantly dealing with immense grief and trauma."

As editor of a daily newspaper, Bhasin knew that the media was being forced to "highlight only the positive image of the government. They're cracking down on every word of critique." Online newspaper archives,

including her own, are being deleted by unknown online hackers, likely the Indian state, to remove evidence of critical reporting.[31] She said that the Modi regime had introduced a raft of legislation "to easily dispossess and dislocate the local inhabitants and encourage new settlements and offer vast tracts of land to Indian business lobbies at throwaway price for starting their ventures, including mining."

The end result was "inspired by the Israeli pattern with a design to dispossess inhabitants of Kashmir in various ways and gradually bring in Hindu majority settlers while pushing Kashmir's Muslim majority to the margins through repressive military methods."

When I asked Bhasin what she feared the most in the next ten years, she said, "If the BJP has its way, Kashmir will be well on the road to becoming another Gaza Strip." Although she said that a revived insurgency was almost inevitable, the likely trajectory of Kashmir was "chaotic and violent."

The fear under Modi was the potential to completely transform India into a Hindutva version of Israel, a far-right Hindu nationalism that tolerates little dissent and few Muslims. This trend was strengthened in late 2019 when the Indian government introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act, a law for members of the Hindu, Jain, Parsi, Sikh, Buddhist, and Christian communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to claim citizenship in India. Muslims were deliberately excluded. As in Israel, citizenship was becoming inextricably connected to religion.

For Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel controls the population registry, leaving them at the mercy of Israeli occupation whims. Israel has controlled this registry since 1967 with absolute power over granting Palestinian passports and ID cards and impacting whether they're allowed to enter or exit the territory.[32] Because Israel no longer processes Palestinian family reunification requests, thousands of Palestinians live as noncitizens and can't access jobs, healthcare, proper education, or the legal system.

Indian officials fear a Palestinian-style insurgency against its rule in Kashmir, or at least claim that they do to justify harsh countermeasures. During the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, a mural in Srinagar with the words "We are Palestine" appeared and the local graffiti

artist Mudasir Gul was forced to deface his own work before being arrested. Twenty Kashmiris were arrested for demonstrating in support of Palestine.

Kashmiri human rights groups are being crushed and press freedoms are almost nonexistent. India is ranked 142 out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. The BJP didn't want to indulge any nascent movement that could one day seriously challenge its rule in Kashmir. There was a much bigger threat of radicalizing the Indian majority toward extreme violence against Muslims than a minority population daring to resist with aggression.

The hashtag #IndiaStandWithIsrael was pushed by the BJP across social media, and leading independent journalist Rana Ayyub tweeted: "Checked most of the #IndiaStandsWithIsrael tweet handles. A common thread that runs through is a visceral hatred for Muslims and a bloodlust to see Muslims massacred and shown their place. Most handles followed by one or more BJP minister or the PM [Prime Minister] himself." Gaurav Goel, the BJP spokesman in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh, tweeted that, "I support Israel, not terrorist groups like Hamas. I request Israel not to show any mercy towards the terrorists." Some Indians in response pushed the #IndiaStandsWith Palestine hashtag.[33]

Like the IDF's sophisticated online campaigns across multiple platforms, the BJP's IT cell, its social media division, has become highly effective at pushing an aggressive and often misogynistic tone.[34] Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen, who detailed the ways in which the social media platform deliberately amplified such division-for-profit, said that the Facebook pages run by the BJP-aligned RSS backed "fear-mongering, anti-narratives." Facebook had too few Indian-language editors to properly vet the hate and it was therefore mostly neither flagged nor sanctioned.[35] India is Facebook's biggest market, with over 340 million users.[36] Kashmiri youth are routinely arrested and tortured for social media posts, and cyber police use surveillance technology to monitor the entire population.[37]

After senior BJP officials made derogatory comments about the Prophet Muhammad in 2022, causing an international firestorm, writer and Booker Prize–winning author Arundhati Roy lamented that "India is an experiment that is failing dangerously." In comments that are directly related to Israel's massive arms dealing with India, Roy said, "If India is buying a fleet of fighter planes from, say, France, it knows that lynching and a little mass

murder will, at most, get a delicate finger-wag. A big market is excellent insurance against moral censure."[38]

Chinese techno-authoritarianism scares the West. The language used is dystopian, and the fear heightened. Readers or viewers are meant to take away the idea that Beijing under President Xi Jinping is destined to create a global infrastructure of control, a unique threat to the world and incomparable to any other nation.

Take a September 2020 article in the *Atlantic* in which journalist Ross Anderson painted a petrifying image of China wanting to have worldwide domination of artificial intelligence. "In the near future," he wrote, "every person who enters a public space could be identified, instantly, by AI matching them to an ocean of personal data, including their every text communication, and their body's one-of-a-kind protein-construction schema." He noted that algorithms will soon be able to gather a multitude of data points, such as reading habits, purchases, travel records, and friends, as well as predict political opposition before it occurs.[39]

China has global ambitions for the surveillance technology it has developed, trialed, and implemented across its vast territory. Beijing has developed the most technologically sophisticated surveillance system in history to collect vast amounts of information on all its citizens to try and predict behavior.[40] Human Rights Watch has noted the similarities between the repression experienced by Palestinians and the 12 million Uighurs, using similar technology and methods: "In both Xinjiang and the Palestinian-Israeli context, surveillance fuels grave rights abuses by enabling the authorities to quickly identify and neutralize peaceful dissent, and to exert intrusive control over a broad population."[41]

Neither China nor Israel needs the other to repress their unwanted minorities, since both have spent years developing techniques to do so, and yet their collaboration and collusion is increasing.[42] A burgeoning defense relationship surged at the end of the Cold War, solidified by Israel's selling of weapons to Beijing after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, when many other nations imposed an arms embargo. Israeli company Magal Security Systems, builder of high-tech fences and walls along Israel's southern and northern borders and the long separation wall between Israel and the West Bank, has installed detection systems at China's airports.[43]

China looked to Israel for advice on how to tackle what both nations framed as a threat from radical Islam or even peaceful Muslims who were not sufficiently patriotic.[44] When dozens of nations at the UN urged China to respect Uighur rights in October 2021, Israel was a notable exception. That fit into a decades-long pattern of the Jewish state turning a blind eye to repression elsewhere in the world. It was therefore unsurprising that a 2022 Pew Research Center study found that a majority of Israelis, unlike citizens in other Western nations, favored stronger economic ties with Beijing, even if that meant ignoring human rights issues.

The facts of Uighur repression are shocking: a deliberate plan to target their culture and identity. And yet when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Donald Trump's loyal former head of the CIA, accused Beijing of committing "ongoing" genocide against the Uighurs less than twenty-four hours before leaving office in January 2021, it was hard not to feel cynical about the designation and note the profound double standards at play. While it is undeniable that China is attempting to neutralize the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, Washington does not truly care about its human rights violations, only about challenges to its global hegemony. With the US and China now in a tussle for dominance, Beijing may supplant Washington as the world's leading superpower in the coming decade, and abuse against the Uighurs is a convenient weapon for the former to wield against the latter.

Much of the international media followed suit, parroting Washington's lines about the Uighurs and classifying China as a major threat to its own people and the world. The *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, a supporter of the Iraq war and Israel, wrote a column in 2021 with the headline, "What Comes after the War on Terrorism? War with China?"[45] This encapsulated the tone of much Western reporting since the emergence of Covid-19 in late 2019 and the Trump administration's belligerence toward Beijing.

It is almost a given in the establishment think-tank world and media that China's authoritarianism will spread globally, but when I asked Ulrike Franke, a drone expert and senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Affairs, about Israel's defense exports she expressed surprise that I described them as more influential than Beijing's. I sensed that she had not even considered the idea. She did not deny the use of Israeli drones in global conflicts and said that Israel was one of the global leaders in the technology, alongside the US, China, and Turkey. She noted that when

China exports its surveillance equipment to other authoritarian states it is likely that Beijing could access the information gained and use it for its own benefit. And yet that is exactly what Israel has done with dozens of nations when selling the NSO Group's phone-hacking tool, Pegasus.

But if Chinese technology and its ideology is a threat the world, why is Israel not viewed in the same way? It is inarguable that Israel, a nation with a tiny population compared to China, has sold more of this equipment and impacted more people, and yet the outrage around Israeli actions is muted. It is clear that this is because Israel is an ally of the West and therefore not an official "enemy," while Beijing is now designated as a national security threat and therefore must be targeted in a multitude of ways. It shows both a lack of care for populations suffering under Israeli-designed surveillance and selective outrage about high-tech monitoring. Both nations are behaving despicably toward their unwanted populations, but only one is sanctioned and demonized.

Some pro-Palestinian activists accuse Israel of committing cultural genocide against the Palestinians; similarly, there are allegations against China with regard to the Uighurs. China wants to erase any autonomous Uighur culture, any possibility of separatism relative to mainstream Chinese society. Beijing resents the fact that Uighurs have their own internal debates, cultural elites, and traditions, framing them as a threat to the Chinese motherland. What is often deliberately forgotten about China's war on the Uighurs is how it was warmly embraced by the West only a few years ago. For years after September 11, 2001, China capitalized on the "war on terror" narrative, claiming that it was fighting Uighur terrorism, and Washington and its allies were keen to help. China learned how other countries, including Britain, Israel, and the US, fought a war against Islamism.

In December 2016, the British think-tank Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) held a UK government–funded, two-day "dialogue" in Beijing, "bringing together UK experts on CVE [countering violent extremism] with Chinese officials and academics working on these issues in Xinjiang to demonstrate the effectiveness of UK best practice in CVE and identify ways this can be adopted in China." A senior RUSI analyst, Raffaello Pantucci, disingenuously told the *Daily Mail* in 2019 that the discussions occurred before the situation in Xinjiang worsened.[46]

Back then, it was politically acceptable to embrace China and support huge economic deals with the growing superpower. Most of the corporate media played along before Beijing become an Official Enemy during the Trump era. It is justified and important to question Britain's engagement with Chinese officials around Xinjiang when offering tips on ways to target the Uighurs, but there's barely any controversy or negative media coverage when Britain routinely engages with Israeli officials because Israel is a friend and ally and its occupation is deemed more politically palatable. Condemning one form of repression while supporting another is hypocrisy writ large.

In 2014, Mark Borkowski, assistant commissioner for the Office of Technology Innovation and Acquisition of the US Custom and Border Protection (CBP), faced questioning at the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security. He was asked about his department's previous failings in securing a virtual security fence along the Arizona section of the US–Mexico border. There had been aborted attempts costing well over US$1 billion during the Bush and Obama administrations in the decade after September 11, 2001, but on this day Borkowski painted a vision of as many as fifty fixed towers, ground sensors, and thermal imaging working together to track border crossings and dispatching agents to find them.

It would be different this time. Borkowski explained that the proposed new equipment had been tested in similar conditions to Arizona, in Israel, and "what we saw in the demos was very impressive." The Israeli company Elbit was contracted to install surveillance towers that were set to cost between US$500 and US$700 million over ten years.[47]

The US–Mexico border has become a major site of Israeli security and surveillance companies, and their work in Palestine is used as a recruitment tool. This ruthless tendering process is highly effective and it makes little difference whether a Democrat or a Republican is in the White House. There's bipartisan backing for securing the 3,000-kilometer-long border. Israeli technology is a vital element in its militarization. The vision is to combine surveillance technology, boundary infrastructure, tactical units and the Integrated Fixed Towers (IFT) system to prevent and deter migrants from entering the country and crossing the deadly desert.

That is the stated aim, but a militarized response in practice leads to mass death. And that is the point. Over seven thousand bodies have been found on the US–Mexico border since the 1990s. A 2019 study by Earlham College and the University of Arizona found that border surveillance towers increased the risk of migrants having to find even more remote and dangerous journeys through the desert.[48] According to research by the Earlham College Border Studies Program in Tucson in 2022, there has been a huge spike in migrant deaths since 2007, including a 643 percent increase between 2006 and 2020, when they were forced to find safety outside the visual reach of the ever-expanding number of surveillance towers.[49]

Weeks after the 2016 US election that saw victory for Donald Trump, Israel's Magal Security Systems Chief Executive Saar Koursh told the *Financial Times* that "without going into politics, we have the most prestigious and battle-proven technology worldwide in border security. If Mr Trump builds a fence or a wall, we believe our technology will definitely be a benefit."[50] Magal's share price soared by 20 percent after Trump's election victory.

In the end, however, the Trump era was not so kind to Magal, and by 2021 the company had both changed its name to Senstar Technologies and sold its business to leading Israeli defense contractor Rafael Advanced Defense Systems. Rafael was an Israeli company with massive global reach, operating in Spain, Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Britain, and the Czech Republic.[51]

In 2016 I obtained a Magal sales brochure, which highlighted the company's work building a wall along the Israel–Egypt border and how the number of immigrants being able to enter had dived from 2,295 people in January 2012 to close to zero by the end of that year. A map of Israel completely erased the presence of the occupied West Bank and showed the Jewish state as the sole entity in the territory. In PowerPoint slides made for European governments just after the massive surge of migrants in 2015, Magal stressed the importance of "understanding [the] infiltrators' patterns" and the need for a suite of technologies and human assets to stop the flow of "illegal immigration."

While Magal was not able to secure huge contracts in the US, Elbit thrived.[52] Its most contentious project has been building a sophisticated surveillance system and towers worth US$218 million across the sixty-two

miles between the Native American land of the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona and the Mexican state of Sonora. Some indigenous leaders approved of the plans, arguing that implementation of the Elbit plan would reduce the need for a physical border wall being built across their territory. This was a false hope, however, because in the end Trump tried to build the wall anyway, leading to indigenous activists being arrested after protests against its construction in 2020.[53]

Other locals opposed the border wall, including Ofelia Rivas, who told me of her lands being scarred by the Elbit construction site.[54] The work disturbed ancestral burial sites while US border patrol intruded on daily life due to constant monitoring and restrictions on free movement. "The community members were forced to comply [with these developments] as they were reminded of 9/11 and what happened in New York," she said. "Terrorists [US border patrol] would cross the border and attack our community. Military fear tactics are very present in our lives."

Native American activists understand how oppression against them is increasingly tied to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Nellie Jo David and Amy Juan, members of the Tohono O'odham Hemajkam Rights Network (TOHRN), went to Palestine in 2017 on a visit organized by the Palestinian group Stop the Wall. Juan said that it was a relief to talk "with people who understand our fears … who are dealing with militarization and technology." Palestinians in the West Bank warned them to fight against the establishment of Elbit's surveillance towers and mass surveillance on their land, explaining what it meant for them daily.[55]

The *Intercept* attended an Elbit live demonstration in Arizona in 2019 and was shown how the system was designed to operate. Using a command-and-control design built originally for the IDF, the company displayed its abilities in the day and night using either long-range infrared cameras or laser illuminators.[56]

The post-9/11 environment across the US–Mexico border was a rapid acceleration of a military-style state where migrants and Native Americans were framed as threats to be managed and harassed. A record number of migrants died in 2021 and 2022 along the US–Mexico border, at least 750 people.

The similarities between the US–Mexico border and Israel's wall through the occupied territories are growing by the year. One informs and

inspires the other, with tech companies always looking for new ways to target and capture perceived enemies. The use of high-tech surveillance tools to monitor the border was backed by both Republicans and Democrats. One company during the Trump years, the billionaire Peter Theil–backed Brinc, tested the possibility of deploying armed drones that would taser migrants with a stun gun along the US–Mexico border.[57]

The use of robot dogs was announced in 2022 as just the latest way to repel new arrivals (though they were of course promoted as a humanitarian solution). The Biden administration has continued the development of a high-tech barrier and physical wall with many domestic and global companies, including Israeli corporations, contracted to build even more obstacles to entry.

The US Defense Department was budgeted to spend close to US$500 million in this space on research, development, and equipment in FY 2022.[58] As a result, it's conceivable in the future that migrants will be killed, captured, or maimed by military-grade drones or hardware.[59] It would be similar to today's reality in Palestine.

Thirteen giant companies are leading contractors with US Customs and Borders Protection (CPB), including Elbit, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Boeing. These firms are all weapons manufacturers, and for them it mattered little if their clients were the US military in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the Israeli government in its occupation.[60] Between 2006 and 2018, CBP, the US Coast Guard, and ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) released more than 344,000 contracts for immigration services worth US$80.5 billion. The first drones tested and used by CBP over the US–Mexico border in 2004 were made by Elbit.[61] This Israeli company liked the Trump administration and donated to his re-election campaign in the 2020 presidential election.[62]

There's growing awareness of the ties between the two struggles in Palestine and the US–Mexico border. In 2022, a leading indigenous group pushing for self-determination in South Dakota, NDN Collective, released a position paper that explicitly connected the indigenous American and Palestinian movements. "We look to our Palestinian relatives who, like us, continue to demonstrate the power of resistance against colonialism and occupation," the collective wrote.[63]

The close relationship between Arizona and Israel long proceeded Donald Trump's presidency. One journalist called the area the "Palestine-Mexico border" due to both nations sharing the same surveillance companies and co-operation.[64] Tucson Mayor Jonathan Rothschild, who left office in 2019 after spending years welcoming Israel's high-tech companies to build a home in Arizona, once said, "If you go to Israel and you come to Southern Arizona and close your eyes and spin yourself a few times you might not be able to tell the difference."[65]

The reasons behind the collaboration are tied to two geographic spaces defined by some as vast and unoccupied and therefore deserving of colonization and control. It's the settler-colonial mentality. Israel is helped by the fact that it's a bipartisan American political belief that backing the Jewish state is akin to necessary religious doctrine.

Arizona, like Palestine, is thus a testing ground. "Arizona is meant to be a showcase for technology before it expands across the country," Tucson-based journalist and author Todd Miller told me. "Before 9/11, there was Border Patrol presence on Native American territory, but now it's hugely expanded with surveillance technology. Native Americans are being racially profiled at border patrol checkpoints." For the border profiteers, Palestinians and Native Americans are both equally deserving of monitoring. It was therefore not surprising that autonomous surveillance robots started appearing on both the Israel/Gaza border and US–Mexico border in 2021 and 2022.

Trump's presidency rightly caused outrage in large sections of the mainstream media, from his hard-right border policies to separation of young children from their parents. But as despicable as these policies were, little of that anger is expressed when they cover similar Israeli policies. In 2019 Trump reportedly suggested to his aides that to stop migrants entering the US, border guards should shoot them in the leg to slow them down and electrify the fence with sharp spikes on top to pierce human flesh.[66] He later asked whether it was possible to build a water-filled trench around the border with snakes and alligators.

6

Israeli Mass Surveillance in the Brain of Your Phone

Because of surveillance tech, a country can avoid massacring protestors now. Today, you're able to identify and stop surveillance of the next Nelson Mandela before he even knows he's Nelson Mandela.

Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack

Griselda Triana is a Mexican journalist, human rights activist, and activist whose husband, Javier Valdez Cárdenas, was slain by a drug cartel on May 15, 2017, in Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa state. Valdez was the cofounder of the media outlet *Riodoce*, which investigated corruption and crime, and wrote about the bloody drug war. He paid the ultimate price—a grenade was thrown into his office in 2009. He had received death threats in the months before his murder, but he bravely continued his groundbreaking work despite the threats.

Ten days after his killing, Triana started receiving unexpected text messages on her mobile phone. She had no idea that they were suspicious until almost one year later, when it was discovered that there had been attempts to infiltrate her phone with the Pegasus system, a phone-hacking tool sold by Israeli surveillance company NSO Group, almost certainly by elements within the Mexican state. "Before Javier's murder I did not know that we were being monitored," she told me. Javier had never informed her about the possibility of phone hacking, and she presumed that he was taking precautions for his safety. "Javier knew about the risks of reporting criminal

activities, but even so he was aware that someone had to document the atrocities of criminal organizations," she said.

The murder of Valdez devastated Triana. "My reaction to Javier's death was tremendous. He was my husband and father of my two children. I was really shocked because Javier didn't want to leave Sinaloa even though he knew they [the cartels] could kill him." I asked her why she thought she had been targeted by Pegasus. She said she believed it was because "they thought that by tapping the phones they could get data from various sources of information or listen to calls related to Javier's crime investigations." To this day, Triana has never been told by the Mexican state why it spied on her—and there's been no court case for the man accused of masterminding her husband's death.

Both the Mexican government and NSO claim that Pegasus is used solely for the purposes of fighting crime and terrorism, but Triana's case proves that this claim is false. Mexico has been a major testing ground for NSO technology. "The problem is that it has been used to spy on people who do not represent a danger to the country," Triana said.

After Valdez's death, Triana moved to Mexico City, where she works as a journalist and activist. The fear has never gone away, however—the feeling of being violated by both her husband's gruesome death and the state's intrusion on her communications. "I am afraid every time I visit Culiacán," she said. "It is something that I have not been able to overcome."

Israel's surveillance apparatus is a competitor and ally of Washington's National Security Agency (NSA), the most powerful eavesdropping network in the world. While outmatched in terms of manpower, Israel has a long history of spying on its closest ally, a fact that does not appear to publicly bother the superpower. Some estimates suggest that around 350 American intelligence officials spend their days spying on the Jewish state.[1] Despite this, the NSA partners with Israel and has passed on data-mining and analytical software to the Jewish state. In turn, says a former NSA intelligence official, Bill Binney, Israel transfers this technology to private Israeli companies, which allows them to gather a massive amount of sensitive military, diplomatic, and economic information to be shared with Israeli officials.[2]

This is the frame around which to see the role of NSO Group, the world's most successful cyber-surveillance company, and other Israeli high-tech outfits. NSO works with the Israeli state to further its foreign policy goals, and is used as an alluring carrot to attract potential new friends. Since its inception, NSO has been funded by a range of global players, including London-based equity firm Novalpina Capital. One of the biggest investors in Novalpina, to the tune of US$233 million in 2017, before NSO was on the company's books, was the Oregon state employees' pension fund.[3] In 2019 pension money for the British gas provider Centrica was also invested in Novalpina.[4]

Former *Haaretz* tech reporter Amitai Ziv, who has done some of the most insightful work uncovering NSO, told me that the power of NSO is not in the money that it makes but in diplomacy: "When Israel is selling cyber-surveillance to some African country, they can assure their vote at the United Nations. Since there's an occupation, we need the votes."

One senior national intelligence reporter, who has investigated NSO for years, told me that the operation had many competitors and "some are even less scrupulous; they tell clients they'll work in places that NSO won't." He said that although NSO and Israeli intelligence firm Black Cube were exposed on countless occasions for "shady dealings, their businesses boomed. There's an advantage to be ruthless." Covid-19 massively benefited Israeli cyber-firms, which received half of global investment in the sector during 2020 and 2021.

NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden calls NSO and other companies like them the "insecurity industry." He puts it bluntly:

> The phone in your hand exists in a state of perpetual insecurity, open to infection by anyone willing to put money in the hand of this new Insecurity Industry. The entirety of this industry's business involves cooking up new kinds of infections that will bypass the very latest digital vaccines—AKA security updates—and then selling them to countries that occupy the red-hot intersection of a Venn Diagram between "desperately craves the tools of oppression" and "sorely lacks the sophistication to produce them domestically." An industry like this, whose sole purpose is the production of vulnerability, should be dismantled.[5]

Snowden is right; the allure of for-profit hacking tools is immense, whether they are controlled by a company or by a state. In the case of NSO, both Israel and the corporation work hand in hand to achieve mutually agreed goals. Through its lax export-licensing procedures, the Israeli state has used NSO to further its national security agenda, perhaps most

prominently in securing the support of Arab dictatorships: Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. For example, in 2020, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman called then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to demand that his country's access to Pegasus be restored when the Israeli Defense Ministry declined to renew the tool's license after the Sunni theocracy had abused it.[6] He was soon granted his wish because Israel viewed Saudi Arabia as a key ally against Iran in the Middle East. The scale of NSO's reach was revealed when Facebook sued the company in 2019 for exploiting a bug in its WhatsApp app to hack 1,400 people across the world. When one of the world's biggest and most unaccountable companies wants to bring down an Israeli company, it's clear that the firm has stepped on too many sensitive toes.

Whether NSO survives or dies, however, will make little difference to the burgeoning global industry in spying tools and cyber weapons. Entire countries can be brought to their knees, such as Russia's cyberattack on Ukraine's entire business and government infrastructure in 2017, or government and private companies inserting "zero-day" hacks, bugs for which there are no known fixes, into virtually every piece of hardware or software on the planet from computers to TVs to fridges. NSO is the tip of the iceberg of this surging industry, which largely operates in the shadows with no public scrutiny. It's not just the American, Chinese, Russian, Israeli, or Iranian authorities unleashing cyber hell but a litany of private entities, sometimes built in democracies, that often act as proxies for state actors.[7] Regulation is virtually nonexistent.

If NSO collapses, many others will rise to take its place and countless Israeli rivals are already in business.[8] One company, Paragon, promotes similar services and is backed by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Unit 8200 veterans. Even if all private cyber-hacking firms are shut down globally, a highly unlikely proposition, far more powerful state actors, from Israel to the US and China to Britain, are more than willing to occupy the space. At least seventy-three nations have used spyware. NSO is just the most prominent spyware company, but large numbers of competitors are stepping in, making these tools even easier to obtain.[9]

The role of Israeli surveillance globally is empowering anti-democratic and fascist governments, Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack told me, and it's not just targeting journalists and human rights. The Israeli defense

sector is evolving and becoming far less public. “In the coming years, I do not see police in Bahrain using Israeli rifles or Israeli drones or missiles being bought by the United Arab Emirates because it could cause another Cuban missile crisis type situation and inflame Iran,” Mack said. “But selling Israeli surveillance equipment is much easier to do and not be detected.” He wants NSO spyware completely banned.

When Mack tried in 2016 to force the Israeli state to stop granting NSO an export license, the government succeeded in making all deliberations private. Supreme Court President Justice Esther Hayut was honest about what was at stake: “Our economy, as it happens, rests not a little on that export.” The Israeli Ministry of Defense admitted selling weapons to about 130 countries in 2021.

The trajectory of NSO is symptomatic of an Israeli tradition in testing, marketing, and proliferating surveillance technology across the globe. The reasons behind this were explained by the former head of Israel’s Defense Export Control Agency, Eli Pinko, who told a private conference in late 2021 that the Jewish state had no choice but to sell weapons and cybertech to anyone who asked. “It’s either the civil rights in some country or Israel’s right to exist,” he said. “I would like to see each of you face this dilemma and say: ‘No, we will champion human rights in the other country.’ Gentlemen, it doesn’t work.”[10]

But it is not just a question of free enterprise. A source with intimate knowledge of Israeli surveillance told me that Israel’s Ministry of Defense had “almost complete control” of NSO Group. “The MOD controls ownership and rights and has a veto on shareholders, owners and operators,” he said. “The tech, patent, and IP [intellectual property] is also controlled and technology has to be protected in a way that it can’t be reverse engineered.”

“I think that it is not well understood by American leaders,” said Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity at the digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation, to journalist Ronan Farrow at the *New Yorker*. “They keep expecting that the Israeli government will crack down on NSO for this, whereas, in fact, they’re doing the Israeli government’s bidding.”[11] The same willful blindness should be directed at much of the international media for its years of viewing NSO as just a rogue corporation, whereas it has always been a crucial tool of the Israeli state.

What's misunderstood or not known, according to Eitay Mack, is that within Israel's Ministry of Defense sits a Department of the Director of Security of the Defense Establishment ("Malmab" in Hebrew.)[12] It aims to ensure that classified information about the defense industry isn't leaked. It runs like an intelligence agency and conducts its own investigations. "The practical implication is that the CEO of NSO, Shalev Hulio, is not able to even burp in front of a foreign or Israeli journalist, openly or unofficially, without Malmab's approval," Mack explained.[13]

NSO has been given unprecedented leeway by Malmab to speak to the media in the last years after it was rocked by countless scandals. This happened because NSO is an invaluable arm of the state and Israel wants to protect its prime asset. The unrelenting pressure on NSO, and thus far less pressure on Israel itself, suits Malmab because even if NSO dissolves and is replaced by another, similar company, Israel's national security interests will be protected (with most reporters still believing that NSO is an entirely independent entity).

The strength of NSO's technology, developed by veterans of intelligence Unit 8200, lies in its hacking abilities, potentially rivalling those of the NSA.[14] This does not please Washington, which wants clear global supremacy in surveillance tools. NSA's powers are the most invasive on the planet. "Cyber weapons have changed international relations more profoundly than any advance since the advent of the atomic bomb," wrote journalists Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti in the *New York Times*.[15] The Five Eyes intelligence sharing network, with the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Britain, is the world's most secretive and intrusive alliance. Utilizing the almost God-like powers of the NSA to spy on billions of global citizens, it's hypocritical for any leader in these nations to complain about the power of NSO because it's challenging Five Eyes dominance.

This did not stop Jeremy Fleming, the director of the UK's intelligence agency, GCHQ, from condemning NSO. The Israeli company's hacking abilities were "completely beyond the pale." He argued, "My personal view is that countries or companies that promulgate [technology] in an unconstrained way like that are damaging and should not be tolerated." The journalists at the *Financial Times* who interviewed Fleming were content to allow their story to be a press release for GCHQ and did not point out the

hypocrisy of supporting Five Eyes, mass surveil-lance but opposing NSO, when both are active in surveilling and suppressing free speech.[16]

NSO was founded in 2010 by Israelis Shalev Hulio and Omri Lavie, school friends who had entered the tech start-up world in the 2000s and soon realized the potential of developing a tool that could access a mobile phone undetected. They were joined by former Mossad employee and military intelligence agent Niv Karmi. Hulio served in the Israeli military reserves and conducted IDF operations in the West Bank in the early 2000s. Conspiring with the dark side was thus assured from the beginning of NSO's life.[17] The first deal the company struck was with the assistance of convicted US felon Elliott Broidy, a long time director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. A big supporter of Donald Trump in his campaign for the presidency in 2016, Broidy was pardoned by President Trump in 2021 after Broidy pleaded guilty to violating foreign lobbying laws.[18]

Broidy was a key player in sealing NSO's deal in 2011 to sell its Pegasus spyware to Mexico. The country was in the midst of its brutal war against drug cartels, which saw hundreds of thousands of civilians killed.[19] Back then, cracking the Blackberry mobile phone system was the holy grail of spyware. NSO named its prize product after the winged horse in Greek mythology because the founders thought that it was akin to a Trojan horse flying through the air and into a mobile phone.

Claudio Guarnieri is head of Security Lab at Amnesty International, a leading team of investigators into online hacking. He worries about the "romanticizing of cyber tools" even though the "tools themselves are pretty simple," he told me. "What's costly is the strategy to deploy the Trojan Horse [malware that misleads phone users of its true aims] and it's difficult to find out who's behind it."

Mexico was an enthusiastic user of Pegasus, and by 2013 it was installed in at least three Mexican agencies with hardware and software worth US$15 million. During this time, NSO sold for US$77 million a package of services that allowed comprehensive surveillance of individuals whom Mexico under President Felipe Calderon wanted monitored.[20] Calderon called NSO cofounder Shalev Hulio, though ended up speaking to his colleague, and said that "I couldn't have asked for a better Christmas present. With what you gave us, we can finally eradicate the cartels."[21]

Mexican officials and corporations were in fact ecstatic about Pegasus and used it extensively, and have claimed that Pegasus was a vital tool in the capture of notorious drug boss El Chapo in 2014 and 2016. El Chapo's second arrest came after monitoring the phone calls between El Chapo and actress Kate del Castillo, who took actor Sean Penn to meet the infamous drug lord.[22]

From a private Mexican company hacking a journalist, despite NSO claiming that it sold only to governments, to advocates of a soda tax that aimed to tackle the huge amount of sugary drinks consumed by Mexicans,[23] it was increasingly clear that the kinds of people being monitored had no connection to crime or terrorism.

Over a decade, Mexico spent over US$160 million on Pegasus, but local authorities said that they could not identify who in the country was behind its use to prosecute anybody. Nonetheless, the profits of NSO's private security business soared. "The greater the violence and insecurity become, the greater the business opportunities for these companies," said Dr. Paloma Mendoza Cortes, a Mexican national security investigator, to *Haaretz*.[24]

The scandals kept on coming in Mexico, where for years NSO had its most profitable work. Drug cartels colluded with corrupt Mexican officials to gain access to Pegasus and use it to eradicate mutual enemies. Criminal networks bribed corrupt officials to target individuals they want removed or monitored. Cyber-surveillance is a completely unregulated industry, and despite NSO's assurances there is no indication that Pegasus is monitored for breaches once installed.[25] Since the 2010s, Mexico's voting pattern at the United Nations has shifted to a less critical stance toward Israeli policies.

Unknown numbers of journalists, critical of state corruption, had their phones hacked by NSO spyware and ended up dead. They included freelance reporter Cecilio Pineda Birto in 2017. Just hours after hosting a Facebook Live video in which he accused local politicians and state police of working with a renegade thug, he was shot dead in the town of Ciudad Altamirano in southern Mexico.[26] A few weeks before his killing, his mobile phone number had been selected as a possible target of Pegasus surveillance by the Mexican state.[27]

This was just the tip of the iceberg of NSO's potential victims, for between 2016 and 2017 leaked data (revealed in 2021) showed that over

fifteen thousand Mexicans had been listed as potential targets of surveillance. At least fifty people connected to Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, including his close family, were placed on a list of phone numbers revealed by *The Pegasus Project*, a leak of fifty thousand numbers potentially used globally by NSO clients.[28]

If Mexico was the first major NSO testbed, other states across the world soon followed.[29] Pegasus was quickly purchased by often undemocratic clients, including the United Arab Emirates, Panama, Kenya, and Turkey, and reportedly assisted in the disclosure of terror cells, child abduction rings, and organized crime.[30] Within a few years, NSO was celebrated across Israel, a global success with its origins in the Jewish state, heralded by academic institutions and lavished with funds. In 2018, an Israeli tabloid program showed NSO paying some of the country's biggest stars to be flown out to an all-expenses paid retreat for its employees in Thailand.[31]

NSO constantly defends its work, making it seem essential to finding and capturing the world's most egregious actors. Cofounder Hulio told the *Washington Post* that he "built this company to save life. Period … All we hear is this campaign that we are violating human rights, and it's very upsetting. Because I know how much life has been saved globally because of our technology. But I cannot talk about it." He insisted that his company had guiding principles in place from the beginning so "we'd be able to sleep at night."[32] NSO rejected my request to speak to Hulio.

Hulio was so on message for the *Post* interview that he feigned concern for the trauma Pegasus had caused. It was "horrible" that journalists and others were targeted by his tools, but "this is the price of doing business. This technology was used to handle literally the worst this planet has to offer. Somebody has to do the dirty work. If somebody says, I found a better way to get criminals, get terrorists, get information from a pedophile, I will shut down this company."

In a separate interview, for an Israeli newspaper, Hulio blamed the global attacks on NSO on "either Qatar or BDS [boycott, divestment, and sanctions] or both. In the end it's always the same entities. I don't want to sound cynical now, but there are those who don't want [Israel] to import ice cream [Ben & Jerry's announced in 2021 that it would cease selling ice

cream in West Bank settlements and East Jerusalem] or export technologies."[33]

The reality was more pedestrian. It was better to assess which countries had not used Pegasus than working out which states had deployed it. The tool had become ubiquitous, the most high-profile cyberweapon in the early twenty-first century. Research agency Forensic Architecture describes the role of NSO and cyber hacking actors as "digital infections" that do not "target civil society actors as individuals, but rather as networks of collaboration." The group found that in India, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia, one person is initially hacked "before their professional networks are targeted within a similar time period. In each of these examples, the use of Pegasus occurs after or during periods where these civil society networks expose or confront controversial or criminal state policy."[34]

Pegasus was used by the Moroccan regime to target its critics, including outspoken opponents of the government who ended up in prison on bogus charges.[35] Israel and Morocco normalized ties in late 2020, with the understanding that the US would recognize Morocco's disputed control of Western Sahara. To sweeten the deal, Israel sold kamikaze drones to Morocco and in the past has sold a missile defense system. When Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited Morocco in November 2021, there was no hiding that the two nations were principally interested in arms trading (with diplomatic relations further down the list). "Morocco is no chump in the cyber field," Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said in 2021, conveniently omitting to mention that it was Israeli technology that boosted Morocco's cyber-hacking abilities.

A full rogue's gallery of dictatorships has bought and deployed Pegasus, nations that either had official relations with Israel or desperately wanted Israeli spyware. Bahraini and Omani activists have been targeted by NSO tech. Rwanda used Pegasus to monitor dissident Paul Rusesabagina, the man who inspired the *Hotel Rwanda* film, who was tricked and then kidnapped by Rwandan officials in Dubai, put on trial in Rwanda in 2021, and found guilty of terror-related crimes. Morocco used Pegasus to spy on senior French politicians including President Emmanuel Macron. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a close ally of Netanyahu, bought Pegasus to spy on opposition politicians and critical journalists. When this was exposed in 2021, Orbán's spokesman defaulted to his government's

usual anti-Semitic refrain when under attack, blaming billionaire Jewish philanthropist George Soros. This was the kind of ally that Israel wanted to foster in Europe as a supporter of the Jewish state.

The infections went on.[36] Catalan's pro-independence politicians were spied on by Spanish officials (leading to the resignation of the head of Spain's intelligence agency). According to *Haaretz* in August 2022, NSO had contracts with twenty-two law enforcement bodies in the European Union (with other spyware firms also operating across the continent).[37] US State Department officials based in Uganda were targeted by NSO tech, and when this was revealed in late 2021 the Israeli company expressed deep regret because it was the first (known) time that US officials had fallen victim. Pegasus is designed so that any phone numbers with the +1 prefix, for the US, can't be targeted, something Israeli officials insisted NSO install to avoid global clients spying on US citizens. However, NSO planned a workaround, called Phantom, which it demonstrated to the FBI in 2019 as a way for the agency to hack Americans.[38]

The CIA bought Pegasus for Djibouti to assist in US counterterrorism activity despite the country being a known human rights abuser.[39] Ukraine asked for Pegasus multiple times but was refused access from as early as 2019 because Israel wanted to maintain good relations with Russia and to continue attacking targets in Syria.[40] This was the year before Russia invaded Ukraine, though the Ukrainian government has again asked to use Pegasus during its war with Russia.[41] This conflict will massively increase the world's reliance on Israeli cyber-tools to counter Russian, Iranian, and Chinese hacking.

NSO's tentacles have spread everywhere. Israel has a long history of arming and backing Uganda's despots.[42] NSO's head Shalev Hulio personally visited Uganda in 2019 to seal a deal with the dictatorship worth between US$10 million and US$20 million.[43] When the arrangement was exposed in 2021 and the US government reacted with fury, Hulio told a friend cryptically that "we always knew this thing had an expiration date," presumably referring to the fact that NSO's client list would eventually come back to haunt them (albeit after the company had made billions of dollars).[44]

The United Arab Emirates reportedly had its contract with NSO cancelled in 2021 when it became clear that Dubai's ruler had used it to

hack his ex-wife's phone and those of her associates. The *New York Times* journalist Ben Hubbard, Beirut chief for the paper, had his phone compromised while reporting on Saudi Arabia and its leader Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, a man who has invested huge amounts of money in commercial spyware.[45] Palestinian human rights activists and diplomats in Palestine have also been targeted by Pegasus, including officials who were preparing complaints against Israel to the International Criminal Court. NSO technology was used by the Israeli police to covertly gather information from Israelis' smartphones. Pegasus had become a key asset for Israel's domestic and international activities.[46]

Saudi Arabia is perhaps the crown jewel of NSO's exploits, one of the Arab world's most powerful nations and a close ally of the US with no formal relations with the Jewish state. It is a repressive, Sunni Muslim ethnostate that imprisons and tortures dissidents and actively discriminates against its Shia minority.[47] Unlike previous generations of Saudi leaders, bin Salman thought that the Israel/Palestine conflict was "an annoying irritant—a problem to be overcome rather than a conflict to be fairly resolved," according to Rob Malley, a senior White House official in the Obama and Biden administrations.[48]

The fact that NSO sold Pegasus in 2017 to the Saudis barely registered any outrage until the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in December 2018. Israel has a long covert history of relations with Saudi Arabia, providing intelligence about threats to its royal family from as early as the 1970s.[49] Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who became the country's spy chief, spent decades meeting Israeli and Jewish leaders as well as Mossad chiefs.[50]

NSO was immediately blamed for being an accessory to the Khashoggi killing, giving the accused ring leader bin Salman and his team the ability to track Khashoggi's movements before his death. NSO denied any responsibility but nonetheless reportedly briefly canceled its contract with the Kingdom. NSO's denials of any complicity in the murder were bogus, with evidence emerging that his wife, fiancé, and associates had their phones compromised by Pegasus both before his death and in the days after, including by the United Arab Emirates, a close ally of Saudi Arabia that often tracks dissidents for its friend. Today, both Khashoggi's wife and fiancé, Hanan Elatr and Hatice Cengiz, live in fear for their lives.[51]

The gruesome way in which Khashoggi was dismembered did not bother the Netanyahu government—in fact, just the opposite. The Israelis wanted NSO and other cyber-hacking firms to be even closer to the regime. Soon after the assassination, NSO met with its then private equity firm owners, Francisco Partners, to discuss the fallout from the Khashoggi scandal. According to sources who spoke to the *New York Times*, NSO alleged that both the Israeli and US governments had wanted NSO's work to continue in Saudi Arabia and after a short time not liaising with the Kingdom, the spyware firm resumed its relationship.[52]

Omar Abdulaziz is a Saudi dissident living in Canada and friend of Khashoggi. He was an outspoken critic of the regime and planned to work with Khoshoggi on countering Saudi trolls on Twitter with an army of volunteers. His phone was hacked by Pegasus in 2018, and soon after some of his friends and family were arrested and imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. The threats escalated to the point where Canadian officials warned him in 2021 that he was a "potential target" of Saudi Arabia and that he should take steps to protect himself. His lawyer, East Jerusalem–based Alaa Mahajna, led a case in the Israeli courts against NSO for its use of spyware against Abdulaziz. Mahajna had previously worked on behalf of Mexicans targeted by NSO, but an Israeli judge imposed a gag order on the case so that sessions were held in secret. This has been a common form of Israeli legal silencing when someone attempts to hold the country accountable for its human rights record. Mahajna told me that Abdulaziz had asked to be represented by him in an Israeli court because he wanted to take on the spyware firm. "It was more tragic [than the Mexican case]," Mahajna said, "because Abdulaziz thought the Saudis listened to all the conversations between him and Khashoggi."

Despite working for fifteen years on challenging the Israeli state over its record in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Mahajna had never felt so threatened as when working on this case. Black Cube, a private Israeli intelligence firm with close ties to Mossad, was hired by NSO to target and entrap Mahajna. The attempt failed, but he was accused of being anti-Semitic by NSO and Black Cube, an allegation he vehemently denied. "I would have taken the case [representing Abdulaziz] if the accused company was Italian or American but it's Israeli. It's unethical and dangerous."

Despite his severe hesitations about the Israeli legal system, Mahajna believed that it was important to use public pressure and the law to get

justice. He said: “In the last ten to fifteen years, the Israeli legal system has heavily changed and it’s more difficult to get a decision in favor of Palestinians—but it’s still a tool to be used. You can’t just ignore the Israeli legal system.” Mahajna was proud of his attempts to get accountability from NSO because “I’m trying to protect Israeli democracy, unlike NSO’s arguments, as I’m using the Israeli jurisdiction to improve rights for all.”

Bin Salman has a history of targeting rivals and critics.[53] Saudi and UAE officials hacked female and male Al Jazeera English journalists and disseminated intimate photos of the women in attempts to slut-shame them. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos had his mobile phone hacked after corresponding with bin Salman via WhatsApp. Prominent female activist Loujain al-Hathloul, who was jailed for years after helping to lead a campaign to finally end the country’s ban on women drivers, had her phone compromised after being released from prison in 2021.

The killing of Khashoggi did not negatively impact NSO’s ability to sell its services worldwide. The power of Israeli government persuasion was too strong. The company was, for example, a presence at the Security and Policing trade fair in the UK in 2020. It had been specifically invited by the Conservative government, alongside three hundred other companies at a three-day event organized by the Home Office. In 2021, NSO was again given prime real estate at the International Security Expo in London. Inside NSO was not promoting Pegasus, after complaints to the organizers by Amnesty International, but instead its Eclipse technology to counter unwanted drones in the sky.

Outside the event there was a small protest organized by the NGO ALQST for Human Rights. Founded by Saudi dissident Yahya Assiri, the protest was against NSO for selling Pegasus to Gulf dictatorships and the exposure of opposition networks. “They [Saudi Arabia] arrested our contacts inside the country, they tortured them, they have been sexually harassed, so it’s not a joke,” Assiri told *Declassified UK*.[54]

Assiri was a target of the Saudi government and had his phone hacked by NSO technology. A former member of the Saudi Royal Air Force and himself a purchaser of weapons systems, he began writing anonymously online while he still worked for the regime. “I had been seeing people struggling with low income,” he told me. “I was wondering why we had all those difficulties in a wealthy state.” He eventually left the country and

applied for asylum in Britain in 2013. When he started identifying himself with his real name online, some of his colleagues in Saudi Arabia were arrested and sentenced to long periods in jail. Although he was eventually granted asylum in 2017, he believed that British authorities potentially delayed the decision in order to please their friends in Riyadh.[55]

It was not until 2018 that it became clear Pegasus was being used to target Assiri. He had received a text message from what looked like the Saudi Justice Ministry claiming that he had a hearing in a Saudi court. He clicked the link and immediately realized that his mobile phone was acting strangely. It was NSO spyware. I asked him why the Saudi authorities went after him even when he was in a different country, and he replied that "they don't want anyone to speak up, to tell the truth, to defend human rights. If someone is like me in the country, they will arrest and torture him and maybe execute him. But if he is outside, they will try to silence him."

The hacking of Assiri's phone and then the killing of Khashoggi raised the stakes considerably for him as a London-based activist. He said that he did not feel safe, though he was not scared, because so many of his friends and colleagues in Saudi Arabia had been targeted and disappeared. "A large number of activists have been tortured because of their connections with me. This is really painful for us. They killed Jamal [Khashoggi] to make us fearful and stop."

Nicole Perlroth, a *New York Times* cybersecurity journalist, recalled speaking to ten NSO executives on a conference call in 2016 "who refused to give me their names or titles." She was constantly told by the anonymous executives that the company was "not cold-blooded mercenaries" and only sold to democracies.[56]

Perlroth was informed that NSO had never been denied a single Israeli export license, indicating that the company had carte blanche to sell to virtually any nation on the planet. She explained that it was clear from the call that NSO was working out its strategy on the fly, literally putting her on hold for minutes after she had asked if the firm would sell to a repressive state. This went to the heart of the NSO modus operandi: denial, obfuscation, and outright lies. For many years this narrative largely worked with the global media, which too rarely made the direct connection between NSO sales and Israeli foreign policy.

I asked the NSO PR team questions about how and why it sells its products to undemocratic states and what safeguards are put into place to ensure that its products aren't abused by the buyer. In response, NSO directed me to its "Transparency and Responsibility Report," released in 2021. In it, NSO claimed that it had "rejected over US$300 million in sales opportunities as a result of its human rights review processes" and said that Israel's Ministry of Defense "restricts the licensing of some of our products and it conducts its own analysis of potential customers from a human rights perspective." The report further claimed that the company is "committed to respecting human rights" by the establishment of a Governance, Risk, and Compliance Committee (GRCC). The GRCC "reviews potential sales, providing recommendations and decisions after an in-depth, risk-based due diligence process including a comprehensive assessment of potential human rights impacts."

NSO wrote that it had sixty customers in forty countries and noted that in the year before the report's release it had opened twelve investigations of "product misuse." It concluded: "We are proud to be the first company in the cyber industry that is implementing policies toward complete alignment with the UNGPs [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights]."

In November 2021 the Biden administration took a surprising step against NSO and another Israeli surveillance firm, Candiru, by placing them on its "entity list." This is a US federal blacklist that prohibits an American company from selling US technologies to NSO. The Commerce Department accused NSO of arming foreign governments to "maliciously target" critics and officials. It claimed that its decision was due to the Biden administration's "efforts to put human rights at the center of US foreign policy, including by working to stem the proliferation of digital tools used for repression." NSO spent several hundred thousand dollars on lobbyists, law firms, and public relations companies in the US to get itself taken off the blacklist.[57] One of the firms hired by NSO, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, distributed a document titled, "NSO Group: Here for You, Here for Good," which stressed an "unparalleled human rights governance program" and tools that have "made our world immeasurably safer."[58]

NSO was reportedly shocked by this experience, and the Israeli government said it would lobby Washington to have the company removed from the Commerce Department list. A former director of Israel's Defense

Export Control Agency, Eli Pinko, said that the Israeli government shouldn't have "caved" to the Americans and French and apologized for NSO's activities.[59] There's no verifiable evidence that this happened, though it's possible that the Israelis did so to convince the Americans to give NSO another chance. A raft of Democrat politicians pushed for tough financial sanctions against NSO. None of this would have likely happened if Trump and Netanyahu were still in power, though Netanyahu's successor, Naftali Bennett, said in 2022 that Pegasus was "very important in the war against terror as well as against serious crime."

While Washington's moves against NSO were welcome, they were also laced with hypocrisy. Why be against NSO when the US is developing and deploying even more powerful surveillance tools against Americans and the wider world? The FBI had tested NSO products and flirted with the idea of using them, but suddenly the US was worried about the hacking of dissidents around the world? It did not add up. The likely reason behind Biden's moves against NSO was US concerns that an Israeli company was encroaching on American technological supremacy. This didn't stop the US Congress from increasingly condemning NSO Group and its ilk and in July 2022 the House Intelligence Committee passed the Intelligence Authorization Act which aims to stop the US intelligence community from purchasing or using foreign spyware.

In the wake of the Biden sanctions, NSO cofounder Shalev Hulio told Israeli TV that it was "hypocritical" to target his company because "there is not one country we've sold to, not one … that the US does not sell to, or that Israel doesn't sell to. So it's a bit hypocritical to say it's okay to sell F-35s and tanks and drones, but it's not okay to sell a tool that collects intelligence." He was right, of course, about the hypocrisy and yet this didn't mean that his firm should simply continue its work indefinitely alongside despots. Nonetheless, by early 2022, with NSO struggling to find new customers and drowning in debt, Hulio told a team representing his company's majority shareholders that it could sell again to states already flagged as "elevated risk" by the firm's due diligence team.[60] NSO was institutionally incapable of change.

Such direct US government intervention was usually reserved for companies operating within China. The Trump administration had used this strategy extensively to target Chinese firms complicit in the repression of the Uighurs, so the news was welcomed by anti-NSO activists, but what

was the real reason for the decision against a key ally? Was it because the NSA hated a global rival due to its surveillance powers and wanted its wings clipped, if not destroyed? This argument was strengthened when Google's security analysts, Project Zero, revealed that NSO tools were as sophisticated as nation-state spying capabilities.[61]

Countries that develop and use offensive cyber tools, such as Russia, the UK, US, and China, are wary about their intelligence services buying NSO products because they fear doing so will allow Israel to know who they are targeting domestically and globally. Would they be opening their security apparatus to Israeli intelligence gathering? These top-tier states can build their own NSO-type tools, but that is less likely in the Global South or in poorer nations, who are more open to buying off-the-shelf Israeli spyware. For the Israelis, according to Yigal Unna, the former director general of the Israel National Cyber Directorate, the Jewish state must protect its global dominance in cyberweapons. "We have to prepare for a battle to defend the good name that we earned honestly," he said.[62]

The Israeli government response to the growing global outrage against NSO and the lack of Israeli regulatory oversight was simply to add a minor bureaucratic hurdle for any future cyber sales; nations that wanted Israeli surveillance networks would have to sign a declaration.[63] It was business as usual.

NSO technology penetrated in countries with a close relationship to Israel. Indian lawyer Nihalsing Rathod is based in the city of Nagpur and often takes on cases challenging the Indian state. He was informed in 2019 by WhatsApp that his phone, along with twenty-one others, had been compromised by Pegasus, and he immediately presumed it was because of his representation of Dalit activists accused of antigovernment activities in the Bhima Koregaon village near Pune in 2018. "The enemy [Indian state] has to gather all inputs which will help them tarnish our image, connect us to unpopular persons, incidences, or organizations and call us antinational," he told me.

Rathod believed that Indian officials wanted to know his defense strategies in the court case, and NSO spyware was the perfect way to find out. He felt exposed. "The episode has made me wiser. Earlier we used to be skeptical as to whether we are being heard, watched, or read but now we are sure. This exposé has helped us learn that the traditional method of

following [people] physically has seen radical change. The surveillance methods have evolved over a period of time, and we need to be aware of our privacy more than ever."

Rathod also feared that incriminating information could be inserted on his devices without his knowledge. This was a legitimate fear because Indian officials did plant compromising documents on the phones of individuals related to the Bhima Koregaon case.[64] More than a dozen activists were jailed for allegedly trying to overthrow the Modi government and for supporting marginalized groups.

"Digitally I can be crippled at any point of time," Rathod said. "The earlier life where I could carelessly keep my phone anywhere and enjoy my personal life is no more. I always feel [that there is] someone whose wide-open eyes keep staring at my personal life, be it in my bedroom, my life partners, or my family."

India has been an enthusiastic user of surveillance technology. Modi's regime deployed Pegasus to strengthen its hold on power. Dozens of Indian journalists and activists were targeted. Police in the state of Pune have hacked into human rights activists' phones and computers to plant incriminating evidence that they then arrest them for.[65] Acclaimed Indian writer Arundhati Roy articulated the dangers of Israeli and Indian collusion by challenging the largely pro-Israel sentiment in the Indian press during the Modi era. "The friendly collaboration between NSO and India appears to have begun in Israel in 2017," she wrote, "during what the Indian media called the Modi–Netanyahu 'bromance'—the time they rolled up their trousers and paddled together on the Dor beach. They left more than just their own footprints in the sand."[66]

Pegasus also spread in nations that barely registered in the global media but played an important role in growing Israel's international support. "I'm in exile and have been so on and off for thirteen years," Togolese activist Farida Nabourema told me. Her adult life has been spent opposing the dictatorship led by Faure Gnassingbé, who has been president since 2005 (his family has ruled since 1967). His regime has been defined by arbitrary arrests, torture, disappearances, rigged elections, and the crushing of free speech and expression. "I've been personally targeted by the regime," she said.

Togo is a West African nation in the Gulf of Guinea with a population of 8 million people and was a French colony until its independence in 1960. Despite Gnassingbé's autocratic rule, Washington provides financial support for the country's law enforcement and military. In the years after Faure Gnassingbé assumed office, many Togolese activists hoped for change, using the internet to push for much-needed political and social reforms. "You may rule over Togo with no accountability," Nabourema wrote on Facebook in 2014 in a post directed at the government, "but we citizens rule over the internet, and we will hold you accountable."[67] She was the cofounder of the Faure Must Go movement, a slogan that exploded on the streets in 2017 after huge protests demanded the reintroduction of presidential term limits.

It soon became clear, however, that the regime could read activists' private WhatsApp messages. Arrests and torture were based on details contained in these conversations. How that had occurred was revealed in a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian cybersecurity research group, after they uncovered the presence of Israeli company NSO Group Pegasus spyware on activists' smartphones, a tool that allows the complete capture of all data on the device. It was bought from NSO by the regime in 2016.

Togo had formed a close relationship with Israel during the rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. When President Gnassingbé visited Israel in 2017, he wrote in a guest book: "I am dreaming of Israel's return to Africa and Africa's return to Israel." Togo often voted with Israel at the United Nations, supporting the Trump administration and Israel in 2017 to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Gnassingbé had pushed for a Togo-based, Africa–Israel summit in 2017 to increase support for the Jewish state across the continent but it was canceled due to hundreds of thousands of protestors rallying against Gnassingbé in the capital, Lomé.

For Nabourema, her struggles are personal. She was inspired by her father, Bemba Nabourema, who has been a dissident his entire life and was tortured by the state. Her siblings oppose her public opposition to the regime, and she has not talked to them since 2013. "Many people see me as provoking the regime rather than the regime provoking the situation," she said. "It's worse to be an activist than a drug addict in Togo." A local human rights group said that 2021 was the "darkest [year] of the democratic era in Togo in terms of press freedom."

Nabourema knew the activists who were targeted by NSO Group technology. In October 2017, one of her colleagues was arrested, and soon after two colleagues who visited him in prison were also detained. Their WhatsApp messages had been breached. Since then, Nabourema has never used Whats App group messages, and she told fellow activists to stop accessing the app. “There was panic when Togo activists discovered Whats App was breached by Pegasus,” she said. “Activists thought that the government wasn’t that astute [before realizing that they used Pegasus], but the government hires people who are. Before all this, other activists thought I was being paranoid.”

Although Nabourema had helped organize digital safety training for local activists after the first NSO breaches, she was despondent about the prospects for real change from activists on the ground in Togo. Five critics of the regime along with a prominent Catholic bishop and priest were informed by WhatsApp, owned by Facebook, in 2019 that they had been targeted by Pegasus.[68] She believed that Pegasus was still used in her country, including during the disputed 2020 presidential election. Since then, Nabourema urged dissidents to not discuss anything sensitive online or store anything compromising on their smartphones. “Nothing has changed in Togo,” she told me. “People just got used to the new reality. We endured dictatorship so long, so when the government comes with new tools of coercion, people don’t reject it. They adjust to it and think it’s just how it is.”

It was hard being out of Togo for so long, with her safety impossible to guarantee if she returned. She said that she had urged locals in Togo to challenge the NSO Group in court, but nobody wanted to do so. “That really disappointed me. It’s the principle that we’re fighting. We’re being spied on. You may not be bothered on a personal level, but as an opposition figure [in Togo] you should be challenging it to protect young Togolese. [Too many Togolese] have adapted to surveillance in the digital world.”

One of the enduring myths about NSO, and many of its competitors, is that it’s a private company looking to make a profit with no formal ties to the Israeli state. It’s a message that’s constantly pushed by the Israeli government, and a lot of the Western media has gone along for the ride, unwilling or unable to investigate what a state-backed spyware outfit means for global relations, privacy, and free speech. It’s easy to condemn Chinese-

or Russian-backed hackers, opponents of Western governments, but what if these corporations are supported and used by a Western-favored nation like Israel?

Israel's security cabinet member and minister for Jerusalem affairs Zeev Elkin contributed to this delusion by saying in 2019 that "NSO is a private player using capabilities that Israelis have, thousands of people are in the cyber field, but there is no Israeli government involvement here, everyone understands that, this is not about the State of Israel."

This statement was a lie. The record of NSO, with some eight hundred employees, shows that it's a highly effective weapon in the Israeli government's arsenal to make friends and influence people. According to a 2016 Privacy International report, Israel had the highest number of surveillance companies per capita in the world, beating both the US and UK. Edin Omanovic, advocacy director at Privacy International, told me that while Israel was unique in terms of the size of its spyware industry, other countries had also monetized their conflicts and designed technology to fight perceived enemies. He included Russia and its battles with internal critics and the UK with its decades-long struggles in Northern Ireland.

The Netanyahu years saw an aggressive push by the Israeli government to make friends by selling them spyware. It is a gamble that largely worked. It is possible to directly link the moves by Netanyahu and Mossad chief Yossi Cohen to improve diplomatic relations with (mostly) autocrats around the world. Netanyahu visited Hungary in July 2016 and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán then visited Israel in July 2018. Orbán's use of NSO tech started in February 2018, with many of his critics targeted. When the Abraham Accords were signed in August 2020, a Netanyahu-and Trump-led initiative between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, Pegasus (and other defense equipment) was used as a key recruiting tool. This tactic worked like a charm. By 2022, the UAE was using Israel-provided air defense systems to protect it from Iranian drones.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to Israel in July 2017, and Netanyahu returned the favor in India in January 2018. India started using Pegasus in July 2017. Netanyahu visited Rwanda in July 2016 and leader Paul Kagame began using NSO in 2017. Netanyahu visited Azerbaijan in December 2016 and President Ilham Aliyev began use of Pegasus in 2018. Poland's anticorruption body bought Pegasus after Prime Minister Beata Szydlo met with Netanyahu in 2017. El Salvador's pro-Israel leader Nayib

Bukele was accused of using NSO tools to target dozens of activists and journalists who were investigating state corruption from 2020. Ironically, Bukele comes from a Palestinian background and his Christian grandparents emigrated to El Salvador from Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the early twentieth century. UAE and Saudi Arabia were also enthusiastic Pegasus users, though Israel didn't have official relations with them when its use began.[69] Thailand's pro-democracy movement was targeted by Pegasus, including activists who pushed for reform of the country's monarchy.

Despite the brutality of some of these regimes, Israel specifically targeted them for sales of NSO technology. According to an employee at an Israeli cyber firm, "Israel marked Saudi Arabia as a strategic target. This is a project that the [Israel] Defense Ministry was involved in. The desire was to coddle and indulge the Saudis with our capabilities."[70] Israel hoped that the Saudis would use Israeli cyberweapons to heighten tensions with their mutual enemy, Iran. An Israeli who pitched NSO products in the Gulf told the *Financial Times*, "It's like the toy that every intelligence officer wants. They love the demos. They love that it is from Israel."[71]

"In many countries, in the United Arab Emirates but also around the world, Mossad is organizing the structure of the [cyber] deals, especially in sensitive states," Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack told me. "In the Gulf states, for example, Mossad has led the charge on building relationships in the last two decades." In 2022, when US President Joe Biden visited Saudi Arabia and Israel, there was open talk of Israel, Saudi Arabia, some Arab nations, and the Gulf states working together to counter Iranian drones and missiles.

There were contradictory signs that cyber weapons concern the Israeli public, though not enough to do anything substantive about it. One Israeli writer concluded that it was because many Israelis admired the art of making money, by whatever means, and respected the soaring high-tech industry because it brought the Jewish state global recognition and prestige. "The public continues to believe that if the Defense Ministry grants an export license, it must be good for the State of Israel," the writer argued.[72] It was not until Pegasus was exposed in 2022 as having been used on some Israeli citizens at home that many in the Israeli public were suddenly outraged about NSO and the possibility of abuse of its technology.

Nonetheless, an Amnesty International poll in 2021 found that a majority of Israelis believed that unregulated cyber-arms sales were "immoral" and those who identified as religious Jews, as opposed to secular, were the most opposed to the trade with unethical regimes.[73] For many Jewish Israelis, NSO and its ilk were a source of pride because they showed that Israel punches above its weight globally and combats terrorists and pedophiles. The implication is clear: Israel is the real victim here. A column-ist in the popular website *Ynet* argued that the problem isn't NSO technology but how governments use it. It was reminiscent of the National Rifle Association mantra that guns don't kill, people do.[74]

The NSO name and the offer of huge salaries used to be enough to secure an endless number of recruits. But after countless scandals, the situation started to change in 2021. The company pumped out social media campaigns to show that it was still alive and kicking. The company's vice president, Ramon Eshkar, wrote in the Israeli press that "Zionism, Israeliness and values are with everything that the NSO does." He said that the company "takes part in significant activities such as missing persons search operations, search and rescue—and all on a completely voluntary basis."[75]

Fewer Israelis bought the message. A former Israeli intelligence officer recounted how he knew a friend who was offered a job at NSO but refused to take it. "They explained that for them there was no difference between working for Israel's military contractor Rafael that makes missiles or working for Nike that makes clothing in sweatshops and working for NSO which faces tons of public criticism," he said.[76]

Israeli journalist Amir Oren explained in 2021 that "the real sting in the NSO story … has little to do with business or diplomacy but rather intelligence and strategic [interests]. If the Israeli seller and consequently the foreign client is able to hack a smartphone, tablet, or PC, their contents and apps, recipients, and contacts, then it's obvious that AMAN [Israeli military intelligence], Shin Bet, Mossad, and the police investigations unit can also achieve the same results, including hacking [French President Emmanuel] Macron's (or even Biden's) phone. Israeli intelligence has an upgraded version [of Pegasus]; the version sold abroad is downgraded. Israel is secured [from such hacks] by countermeasures."[77]

What Oren meant was that Israel had the technology to rival any global power, and Pegasus was a toy compared to what the Jewish state was capable of. The power of NSO and the Israeli state was almost unstoppable, even ensnaring Apple, which was forced to issue an emergency software update in 2021 for its 1.65 billion users after Citizen Lab discovered a vulnerability in its operating system that NSO had exploited. Unlike many in the Western media, Apple issued a press release and took aim directly at Jewish state involvement: "NSO Group creates sophisticated, state-sponsored surveillance technology that allows its highly targeted spyware to surveil its victims."

Ron Deibert, a Canadian professor of political science, a philosopher, and director of Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, told me that the major challenge facing opponents of the cyber surveillance industry is how to tackle the fact that "the world today is run by a transnational class of gangsters. That's the way I think about it, like kleptocracy globally."

In his 2020 book, *Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society*, Deibert argues that without fundamental changes to the financial incentives inherent in companies like NSO, the future of the human condition is bleak. "Personal data surveillance and authoritarian state controls present a 'perfect fit,'" he wrote. "Seemingly endless lucrative business opportunities that undermine public accountability and facilitate despotic rule."[78]

It is not only NSO that's causing harm around the globe. Cellebrite is another Israeli company that works with repressive states and yet it has received far less criticism. It is hard to know exactly why it has escaped NSO's notoriety, but perhaps it's because Cellebrite prefers to operate under the radar with its phone hacking capabilities or because NSO's alliance with despots has uniquely captured the attention of researchers and media outlets that often fail to make the necessary ties to the Israeli state. "Cellebrite sells equipment to hack phones from short distance and NSO Group from long distance, but the effect is the same for activists," Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack told me.

Founded in the 1990s, Cellebrite started out as a consumer technology firm but by the 2010s was deep into the surveillance business and mobile phone hacking because it saw the potential of huge profits from working with law enforcement officials around the world. In late 2021, Cellebrite

launched a large-scale PR campaign called “Heroes behind the Heroes,” featuring online ads and physical billboards that promoted the essential work being performed by their “digital intelligence solutions” in police forces around the globe.[79]

Unsurprisingly, the PR blitz was selective about what services Cellebrite offered and who these advertisements were intended to influence. In 2022 Eitay Mack wrote to the company and Israel’s Defense Ministry to remind it where Cellebrite equipment had ended up, including Russia, where journalists are pursued, and the Philippines, where countless reporters have been murdered during the reign of President Rodrigo Duterte.[80]

Neither the Israeli government nor Cellebrite could claim ignorance of what might happen to sophisticated surveillance gear in the hands of autocrats.[81] There is a published photograph of Cellebrite employees meeting Duterte in 2018 and admitting that the corporation had trained a range of public bodies, some of whom were directly complicit in the murder of thousands of Filipinos during Duterte’s brutal “war on drugs.” When challenged on its complicity, Cellebrite told *Haaretz* that it had “strict oversight mechanisms” over its sales. It was a statement that was remarkably similar to NSO’s when pushed on its international relations.

The countries where Cellebrite surveillance tech has been used against critics, journalists, dissidents, or human rights workers include Botswana, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Uganda.[82] This includes the Universal Forensic Extraction Device (UFED) hacking tool, which allows the extraction of information from mobile phones. In Bangladesh the hardware was used by the Rapid Action Battalion, a notorious paramilitary unit, which has been accused of extrajudicial killings and disappearances. When this connection was exposed in 2021, the company quickly announced that sales to Bangladesh were being suspended, though it was likely Bangladesh could still use the tech that had already been acquired. Furthermore, Cellebrite said it would establish an advisory committee to ensure that “ethical considerations” were prioritized moving forward. Once again, Cellebrite used the same PR-driven tactic employed by NSO. Bangladesh has no formal ties with the Israeli government, but this did not stop Israeli intelligence experts from training Bangladeshi officers during a four-day event on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary, in 2019. The Ethiopian federal

police use Cellebrite products despite the government's mass detention of minorities and repression of dissidents, journalists and activists.[83]

Like NSO, Cellebrite resists media scrutiny. According to reporting in *Haaretz*, the Israeli Defense Ministry does not oversee Cellebrite sales because its products are somehow classified as dual-use civilian services and not a security-related export, a definition that therefore allows Cellebrite to operate in dozens of countries with no serious Israeli oversight.[84]

The company has never had problems getting high-paying clients. Over 2,800 US government customers, including law enforcement agencies, including the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and the Department of Agriculture, have purchased the company's equipment, and the firm has hired prosecutors, police officers, and Secret Service agents to train people to use it.[85] The company has announced that it has secured business with six of the world's biggest oil refiners and six of the planet's largest pharmaceutical firms. It has also moved into the increasingly profitable field of corporate surveillance. Elsewhere, Celleb-rite systems were purchased around 2015 by the Venezuelan government amid allegations that it was used by the regime to target dissidents.

However, bad press has nevertheless sometimes impacted the company's reach. The corporation said that it would no longer sell its UFED to Russia and Belarus after Eitay Mack revealed in court documents in 2021 that it had been used to surveil gay activists and opposition figures in both nations, including an associate of Russian political dissident Alexei Navalny and critics of Belarussian dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

In 2021 the company claimed to have withdrawn from activities in China and Hong Kong, but the *Intercept* later discovered that the brokers who had sold Cellebrite were still selling its hacking technology to Chinese police on the mainland and in Tibet.[86] Human rights groups posited that the company was cutting official ties with some repressive states because it went public on the Nasdaq market in 2021 and wanted to leave controversy behind.[87]

But doing that was not so easy. Cellebrite had sold its tools to Indonesia, a Muslim nation with no diplomatic relations with Israel, and the country had used them to target political opponents and activists, including in West Papua, as well as members of the gay community who used dating apps

such as Grindr. Saudi Arabia was also a willing customer even after its 2018 assassination of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In a 2020 interview, Cellebrite CEO Yossi Carmil rejected any suggestion that his firm was similar to NSO because what his company did was "very limited in its authority, unlike the world of the clients of NSO and others, where illegal things as well as covert things are done. Cellebrite is entirely in the good zone, with judicial orders. We don't create hacking devices for private entities or espionage agencies."[88]

Upturn, a nonprofit in Washington, found in 2020 that Cellebrite tech was used frequently by US law enforcement to hack into smartphones, allegedly to fight crime. At least forty-nine out of the fifty biggest police department had used the tool to investigate crimes such as shoplifting, rape, and murder.[89] Encrypted smartphones are routinely and successfully broken into with Cellebrite tech; Upturn found that it had been done hundreds of thousands of times between 2015 and 2020.

Like NSO, Cellebrite operates in nations that have friendly relations with Israel and in those with whom there's little to no official diplomacy, on the basis that cyber weapons sales do not need to respect these niceties. Ethical considerations are not a factor in Israeli government decision-making. "It was amazing that Cellebrite wasn't worried about US sanctions on countries like Russia and China and were still happy to sell equipment to Moscow and Beijing," Eitay Mack told me, "but only when there was publicity against them they reacted and canceled contracts in both countries." The advantage for Israel, Mack said, is that "while it will be hard for Israel to sell Israeli guns or weapons that can be identified [as happened for decades before the cyber age], Israeli surveillance is different" and less identifiable as originating in Israel.

A former Cellebrite employee, previously a member of the defense establishment, wrote anonymously in *Haaretz* that "I can say from personal experience that the company does nothing to prevent the abuse of its products by customers." The reason repressive states want Israeli tech, whether from Cellebrite or NSO, is simple: China and other states make "inferior alternatives."[90]

Apart from Cellebrite, the list of Israeli cyber-surveillance firms is long. Tal Dilian, a former IDF commander now based in Cyprus, stunned observers

of this secretive world by showing a *Forbes* reporter in 2019 inside a truck that he claimed could hack into any nearby smartphone. It was rare to get a glimpse of this technology up close, though Cypriot authorities confiscated it because they alleged it was designed for commercial espionage.[91] Dilan's company, Intellexa, still operates, and he is regularly quoted in the global media as an expert on cyber threats despite the fact that he has financial incentives to exaggerate them.[92]

Work opportunities in the shadowy cyber industry have brought huge riches to Israelis with similar military backgrounds. When a hugely popular chat app, ToTok, was launched in the United Arab Emirates in 2019, it attracted millions of downloads. But it was in fact a spying tool, just the latest entry from a long list of repressive states in the Gulf that have used private American and Israeli companies to design surveillance systems to monitor their own citizens. The firm DarkMatter was behind it, an Emirati corporation that has attracted former Israeli intelligence officials and National Security Agency staff.[93]

Away from the Gulf, a number of states have embraced Israeli cyber tools because the technology was viewed as some of the most effective. South Sudan, a nation that became independent in 2011, bought communications interception technology from Israeli company Verint Systems between 2015 and 2017 despite South Sudan's intelligence services being a known human rights abuser. Allegations of war crimes against the South Sudanese elites did nothing to stop the sales. Azerbaijan and Indonesia were also buyers of Verint systems and used the tools to target the gay community.

Other Israeli surveillance firms were more brazen, operating in the heart of the US to target pro-Palestinian activists. The now defunct Psy-Group was funded by Jewish-American donors in the US after they had promised to keep their identities secret. It conducted operations around the world, from Ukraine to Canada, and used a range of dark arts, including creating fake content and spreading it online against enemies of a particular client.

Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, the British consulting firm used by Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016, admitted that Israelis were used to entrap political opponents. "We use Israeli companies … [who were] very effective in intelligence gathering," he said. It was Psy-Group. This company, and others like it, were dubbed "private Mossads."

Psy-Group was a private Israeli intelligence outfit founded by individuals with ties to Israel's deep state. In late 2016, the company partnered with Cambridge Analytica to obtain business from the US government. Both firms imagined creating a program for the deradicalization of ISIS sympathizers at the Global Engagement Center housed at the US State Department. Founding Psy-Group entrepreneur Joel Zamel had a longtime ambition to work on counterextremist programs and support pro-Western governments. Sometimes this got him into trouble. A US Senate report in 2020 found that Psy-Group had tried to influence the 2016 US presidential election by pitching its service to the Trump campaign. Psy-Group is no more, but Zamel now works on a range of private intelligence companies.

In its heyday Psy-Group was busy, deploying a range of software and people working as quasi-spies in the US with social media and dark web searches and on-the-ground surveillance to monitor Jewish and Palestinian supporters of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement around 2017. Yaakov Amidror, the former national security advisor to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the *New Yorker* that he worked with the company because "the Israeli government was not there [watching Palestinian activists], and I thought that, if private people are ready to do it, it can be helped." His advice to Psy-Group staff was, "Don't beat them. Don't go into their houses."[94]

The mission was to expose American BDS supporters. Psy-Group staff were told the operation was legal, and to particularly focus on BDS leaders at American universities. The company collaborated with the neoconservative and prowar Washington think-tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD). After doing the work, Amidror implied to the *New Yorker* that Psy-Group was performing a public service. He believed that BDS backers were likely funded by Hamas or the Palestinian Authority, despite offering no evidence for this claim, and argued it was justified for an Israeli intelligence company to gather information on US citizens who were doing nothing illegal.

The disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein wanted to hire the most effective private intelligence firm that money could buy to kill any media stories about his sexual assault on countless women. In 2016, he chose Israeli company Black Cube, founded in 2010 by former Israeli

intelligence officers and the former head of Mossad, Meir Dagan. The company would get a US$300,000 bonus if a major story about Weinstein did not appear in the *New York Times*. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak admitted introducing Weinstein to the Israeli firm. Nonetheless, Weinstein failed in his mission, and he's now in a US prison for a string of rapes.

This was the first time that many people had first heard about Black Cube, but it has long been a mainstay on the global market for private and corporate intelligence, leveraging itself in the same way as NSO by hiring the best in the spying business. Some of its more infamous work has included gathering intel on senior Obama administration officials Ben Rhodes and Colin Kahl, both key backers of the Iran nuclear deal. The clients behind this job were reportedly aides to Donald Trump (though Black Cube denied it).[95]

Isabel Dos Santos, once Africa's richest woman, hired Black Cube to dig up dirt on the Angolan government, which she accused of wanting to seize her assets. In response, Angolan authorities in 2020 accused Dos Santos, daughter of Angola's former authoritarian president, of embezzling huge amounts of funds from her homeland's natural resources and funneling them into offshore accounts in the Middle East and Europe. The US government sanctioned her in late 2021 for "significant corruption," a move that barred her from entering the country.

The Black Cube client lists reads remarkably similarly to NSO's modus operandi; work where many others would not, and in collaboration with the Israeli government. Black Cube was hired in 2015 by the Democratic Republic of Congo's then President Joseph Kabila after the corporation's director, Dan Zorella, a former member of an elite IDF intelligence unit, met him to establish Operation Coltan. Its aim was to spy on his opponents, which included any family members who criticized him in private.

Black Cube was also hired to spy on a Romanian state prosecutor in 2016. Zorella claimed that his company was working as an "arm of" that country's intelligence service.[96] The Israeli company had been hired by a Romanian senior official to target the country's former top corruption prosecutor. The mission failed, and three Black Cube employees, including Zorella, were given suspended sentences in a Romanian court in 2022.

The firm worked with allies of Hungary's authoritarian pro-Israel leader, Viktor Orbán, in 2018 when his opponents, including pro-democracy groups, started receiving suspicious emails from company executives who wanted to meet and give them money. Those few people who participated in the meetings, held at posh restaurants in Paris, Vienna, and Budapest, were asked about the Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros. Their comments, secretly recorded and leaked to Hungarian media, suggested that they were funded by Soros.[97] It was not coincidental that Black Cube was close to the Netanyahu government at a time when Hungary was one of Europe's staunchest backers of the occupation.

Not unlike the rolling scandals around NSO, the only time both Black Cube and NSO caused many Israeli Jews to get upset was when it became clear that their methods had been turned against them (and certainly not against Palestinians or foreigners). Israelis were angry when it emerged in 2019 that one of its richest men, tycoon Idan Ofer, had contracted Black Cube to target then Finance Minister Yair Lapid in 2014 due to his attempts to shape tax policy on natural gas finds. The aim was to smear Lapid and force him to back down and not raise taxes that would negatively impact Ofer's profits. Since most of the mainstream Israeli press is reliably patriotic and supportive of the country's intelligence services, the Israeli journalists who broke this story on the investigative TV program *Uvda* were likely worried that average Israelis would lose faith in their security agencies.[98]

Black Cube is not, however, immune from censure. Facebook banned it in 2021 and wrote that the company "operated fictitious personas tailored for its targets: some of them posed as graduate students, NGO and human rights workers, and film and TV producers." The company has spent years using false identities to gather intelligence for its clients. Fake Facebook accounts, bogus websites, and phony LinkedIn profiles are deployed to entrap individuals to either divulge information online or meet in person. For example, there are examples of people receiving suspicious emails from unknown filmmakers who are digging for usable intel.

A former Black Cube employee told me that the company is "like an Israeli government agency. It often works for the Israeli government." The company itself admitted that it worked for the Israeli Defense Ministry between 2012 and 2014 and that its staff were placed full time on an IDF intelligence base.

The former Black Cube staffer's work involved gathering intelligence on clients who had paid huge amounts of money to the firm. Contracts could be worth US$100,000 or even more, depending on the time required to complete the work. This former staff member, who requested anonymity, said that Black Cube was filling a legitimate role in society because the police were failing to properly investigate white-collar crimes due to "austerity-pushed law enforcement." It was the same line used by a former top UK police officer, Adrian Leppard, who joined Black Cube's advisory board in 2020. He told the *Financial Times* that "only one in 500 [cyber] frauds are actually prosecuted now" and that Black Cube was therefore necessary.[99]

The former Black Cube employee said that he was a "quasi-regulator and quasi-police these days. I'm picking up jobs that I shouldn't be paid for because the police should be doing it for free. That's where private intelligence spills over." He acknowledged that Black Cube operated in places where Mossad could not, including Libya after the Western overthrow of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. "Black Cube could have ears and eyes in its state-owned oil company," he said.

I obtained an internal Black Cube "Weekly Report" document from 2012 that outlined the variety of jobs the company was doing at the time. It did not go into detail about them all but listed meetings with the IDF and meetings in Germany and stated that the company had "organized an investigative journalist" with the "potential to go to Iceland," a likely reference to work with an undercover reporter to source information for a client.

London-based spy, former journalist, stockbroker, and IDF soldier Seth Freedman admitted to working for Black Cube and investigating ninety-one people associated with Weinstein who had some connection to his sexual assaults. They included actress Rose McGowan, who Freedman tricked, along with many others, into an interview for a supposed story in the paper he used to write for, the *Guardian*. When asked by the BBC if he regretted his work, he said that "my job is to get a piece of information that isn't freely available, and as long as I stay within the letter of the law, I'm not worried about your ethics when you judge me."

Does it matter, as a number of respected national security journalists told me, that Black Cube operatives are often exposed as amateurs who cannot competently do their jobs? A number of intelligence sources told me

that the company's willingness to go further and push the legal limits more than many other firms meant that it stood out as desirable to potential clients. But according to Barry Meier, a former *New York Times* journalist and author of a 2021 book, *Spooked*, on the private spy world, Black Cube "wasn't good at what it did. The firm, despite the high prices it charged clients, kept recycling tactics from one case to another one. The result was that some of its operations looked like bungling, low-rent clown shows."[100]

How to stop these NSO-type companies in their tracks? It will take systematic, global change because the disappearance of NSO itself will not remove the demand for tools like Pegasus by democracies and dictatorships alike. David Kaye, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression between 2014 and 2020, argues that "our attention shouldn't be focused only on one company [NSO] because if we're only focused on them then we might think that the solutions are just to restrain Israeli export control processes. Or we need to ensure that NSO alone abides by emerging standards for corporate, human rights responsibility. The problem is global."

Kaye believes that an international code of conduct for cyber-surveillance firms is an important first step, though he acknowledges it would likely be nonbinding and thus making enforcement close to impossible. Government regulation was the better option, Kaye told me, because then companies would fear stepping out of line. He compared it to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention where most of the world, except the US, Israel, China, Pakistan, India, Egypt, and Russia, came together to outlaw the destructive weapons.

"You could imagine a process where some members of the international community want to ban this stuff [cyber weapons]," Kaye said. "My guess is that most governments would only be willing to regulate the export and use, because give me a reason why states would give up this ridiculously powerful tool?"

During his time as a UN Special Rapporteur, Kaye regularly called out NSO for its transgressions against human rights activists and journalists worldwide. At the end of his term in 2020 he acknowledged that global regulation was in its infancy. "Right now, it's almost as if there are no shadows because there are no legal constraints," he told the Committee to

Protect Journalists.[101] UN human rights experts, including Kaye's UN successor, Irene Khan, issued a call in 2021 for states to "impose a global moratorium on the sale and transfer of surveillance technology until they have put in place robust regulations that guarantee its use in compliance with international human rights standards."

The challenges of regulating this out-of-control industry may be hard to overcome, since it is already so ubiquitous around the globe. But as Shoshana Zuboff, Harvard professor and author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* has said, this is the same feeling that many people had before unions started fighting for workers' rights or the abolition of child labor.[102] A simple, sensible suggestion is to ban all commercial tools in cyber-hacking. "Eliminating the profit motive reduces the risks of proliferation while protecting progress," Edward Snowden argues, thus "leaving room for publicly minded research and inherently governmental work."[103]

Not doing so guarantees a proliferation of NSO-type tools where every person on the planet might have their mobile phone or digital devices vulnerable to exposure. But this is not enough. The purveyors of these tools, whether in Israel, the US, or Italy, must be held legally liable. A few major court victories against surveillance corporations could be morally clarifying for those in the trade.

Hacking of mobile phones is just the beginning of what is possible in the complete surveillance of our lives. Bill Marczak, a senior research fellow at Citizen Lab, fears that the improved security of mobile devices in the future could "make it extremely difficult for NSO and others to target them. It may come to the point where it's not feasible. Maybe they'll hack smart cameras in homes instead, turning on microphones to listen in. Or fridges, toasters, and cars. There's no shortages of domains to surveil."

The logic of rapacious capitalism without oversight is a key barrier to curtailment of mass surveillance. "Market forces push insecurity in many devices, because it's cheaper and easier to make these devices, making many devices potential targets for hacking," Marczak told me.

7

Social Media Companies Don’t Like Palestinians

We feel social media is the only way left to get attention. Every post, tweet, video makes a difference. This is how we reach out to the masses of decent people and governments around the world.

Muna el-Kurd, Palestinian activist in East Jerusalem, May 2021

The man in the photograph was among like-minded friends. Israel’s then justice minister, Benny Gantz, conducted multiple Zoom meetings with social media executives in May 2021 during the height of the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Israeli officials had released a photo showing Gantz talking at his desk in front of a large screen where the executives appeared. Gantz spoke to both Facebook and TikTok and demanded that they remove content that he claimed incited violence and spread disinformation. He told them to act quickly on take down requests from the Israeli government.

“These are measures that will directly prevent the violence that is being intentionally stirred through social media by extremist elements that are seeking to do damage to our country,” Gantz said. “We are in a moment of social emergency, and we expect your assistance.”

During these meetings Gantz talked with executives including Nick Clegg, then Facebook’s vice president for global affairs and communications and former deputy prime minister of Britain, alongside Joel Kaplan, Facebook vice president of global public policy and former senior official in the George W. Bush administration. Both Facebook and

TikTok expressed their condolences to the Israelis who had lost their lives in the conflict, but there was no mention of the hundreds of Palestinians killed. In the week after the meeting, the Israeli government said that Facebook was far more responsive to its requests to take down content.[1]

Clegg, Kaplan, and the Dubai-based Middle East and North Africa policy chief Azzam Alameddin also met virtually with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and apologized for Palestinian posts being removed. Facebook admitted that key words such as "resistance" and "martyr" were removed in error and promised to reevaluate how they assessed content but offered no concrete details about how they might act better in the future. Facebook tried to counter the criticisms by all parties during the conflict by setting up a "special operations center" filled with Hebrew and Arabic speakers and said that its initiative was aimed to ensure that its policies were not being violated.

Israel did not have much to worry about because social media platforms during this period, from Facebook to YouTube and TikTok to Twitter, routinely blocked content that was critical of Israel or showed the Palestinian point of view. Although such censorship seemed worse during this clash with Hamas, it followed a predictable path over the last decade of Palestinian posts disappearing at an alarming rate.

Within Israel, the power of the state to crack down on what it deemed inappropriate content only grew. Israel's Cyber Unit was given the green light by the Supreme Court in 2021 to operate in the dark, liaise secretly with social media companies, and remove posts without any consultation with the users. It is a closed-loop system in which Palestinians are left guessing as to the reasons why their words disappear.

A former TikTok moderator, Gadear Ayden, revealed in 2021 that she was part of the "Israel team" during that year's Israel/Hamas conflict and noticed far more videos being left up on the platform that featured violent, anti-Palestinian content. Ayden said that all management teams were run by Israelis and that "none of the Arabs progressed to any senior positions at the company in that group."[2]

When Palestinian homes in the occupied East Jerusalem area of Sheikh Jarrah were slated for removal by Israel in April 2021, activists found that posts with the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah were disappearing from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Twitter accounts were suspended and

Facebook posts removed. Graphic warning labels were placed on text-only Instagram posts and live streams from Sheikh Jarrah were made inaccessible. No tangible reason was given apart from a supposed technical glitch, according to an Instagram spokesperson.[3] The company added that the problem was not just occurring in East Jerusalem but also in Colombia and indigenous communities. It was "not our intent whatsoever" to intentionally suppress "their voices and their stories."

The *Washington Post* headlined a story with remarkable honesty in May 2021: "Facebook's AI Treats Palestinian Activists like It Treats American Black Activists. It Blocks Them."[4] It dismissed claims by Facebook and Twitter that it was the fault of artificial intelligence that Palestinian stories were disappearing online. Jillian C. York, director for international freedom of expression at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, explained: "Ultimately, what we're seeing here is existing offline repression and inequality being replicated online, and Palestinians are left out of the policy conversation." This was confirmed in late 2021 when leaked documents from inside Facebook proved that senior executives didn't want to curtail extreme speech posted against minority groups in fear of offending "conservative partners."[5]

This ubiquitous censorship impacted many Palestinians. Hundreds of posts simply disappeared for unknown reasons. East Jerusalem–based activist Mohammed El-Kurd, with around 1 million followers on both Twitter and Instagram, found his Instagram Stories being severely limited in reach in May 2021, and even Facebook employees didn't know why. The company later claimed it was due to a technical glitch. An internal document acknowledged that Facebook had taken a "stance to minimize our over-enforcing on content from Palestine—due to the necessity of allowing folks on the ground to share what's going on—there should be no reason his content is getting removed or restricted."[6] And yet the problems kept on happening.

A Palestinian man had a baby son called Qassam and when wishing him happy birthday on Facebook in 2021 the post was removed. It was probably because the company thought he was referring to the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing. "These words are part of our discourse, it's a part of our culture," Iyad Alrefaie said, director of an organization Sada Social, which monitors digital rights in Palestine. "Face-book didn't

differentiate between any context."[7] A man in Gaza had posted a photo of a building before it was hit by an Israeli missile on May 15, 2021, and it was removed by Instagram (though reinstated after complaints).[8]

The double standards were obvious. In May 2021, according to 7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, 183,000 out of 1,090,000 Hebrew public conversations on social media were filled with incitement against Arabs and racism by Israeli Jews and yet the content was not removed. Some of the offending tweets included "A good Arab is a dead Arab" and "Scum. Just wipe them off the face of the earth and never leave a trace. Slaughter all Gazans and all the Arabs everywhere." Another one read: "All the Arabs in the world and the Arabs who are reading this message, may all your family members have cancer."[9]

Perhaps the most blatant censorship, only partially corrected later, was Facebook-owned Instagram removing many posts about the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, when Israeli forces stormed the compound as hundreds of Palestinians prayed there in May 2021. The company had mistakenly designated the location as being associated with "violence or a terrorist organization" as it was the "name of an organization sanctioned by the United States government." Moderators or the algorithm had confused Al-Aqsa Mosque with the Palestinian militant group Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, labeled a terrorist entity by the US and European Union. A source inside Facebook told me that the Al-Aqsa hashtag had been initially restricted because it was connected to a "designated [terrorist] organization."

It is comforting to think that this was just an innocent mistake by a social media behemoth, but a former insider disagreed. Ashraf Zeitoon worked as Facebook's head of policy for the Middle East and North Africa region from 2014 to mid-2017 and told *Buzzfeed News* that the corporation employed terrorism experts who could distinguish between a Muslim holy site and terrorists. He had worked on crafting policies for Facebook on how it designated terrorism. "For them to go and identify one word of a two-word name as associated with a terrorist organization is a lame excuse," he said. "They are more qualified than this and more competent than this." He also accused Facebook of not wanting to upset the Israelis.[10]

Some current Facebook staff were incensed by the regular occurrence of disappearing critical voices from the platform. They placed a question on

the agenda for a company-wide meeting in 2021 with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg: “Our integrity systems are failing marginalized groups (see: Palestine, BLM [Black Lives Matter], Indigenous women). What will we do about it?”

In June 2021, nearly two hundred Facebook employees signed an open letter demanding that the company take steps to ensure that Palestinian voices were protected. Their recommendations included Facebook hiring more Palestinians, revealing more about government-backed requests to remove posts, and clarification around policies involving anti-Semitism.[11]

A growing number of Facebook staff were expressing their discontent with the ways in which the platform was not just curtailing Palestinian content but anything written in Arabic. After both Facebook and many of its supporters claimed that the platform was instrumental in assisting the Arab Spring, the sheen had worn off and people saw what the platform had become. “Facebook is losing trust among Arab users,” a Facebook software engineer wrote to his colleagues in 2021.

There are plenty of mysteries that remain unexplained. In mid-2021, Facebook users around the world suddenly found that they had liked or started following a page called “Jerusalem Prayer Team” without them wanting to do so. With 75 million followers, it was the world’s biggest pro-Israel Facebook page. Its aim was to build support for Israel, run by the Christian Zionist and pro-Trump activist Mike Evans. It’s unclear why this happened.

In 2021 Gaza journalists had access to their Facebook-owned WhatsApp accounts blocked for mysterious reasons, though it was possibly because these reporters followed Hamas on the platform. None of this was reason to cut access to WhatsApp. Less than one day later, WhatsApp blocked the accounts of at least thirty far-right Jewish extremists in Israel, including the wife of far-right party Otzma Yehudit leader Itamar Ben-Gvir, who currently sits in the Israeli Knesset. He believes that “dis-loyal” Arabs should be expelled from Israel.

With more Palestinian staff, Facebook might have been less likely to remove posts by Palestinians with the words “resistance” and “martyr” during the May 2021 uprising because they would be aware that in the vast majority of cases they were not incitements to violence but expressions of support for Palestine.[12] A biased algorithm and ignorant human moderators

were blind to this reality, and Palestinians were weak politically and so could not compete with the power of the Israeli government and its influence within the company. It is why some Palestinians are worried about the growth of the Metaverse, the immersive digital world that will grow in the coming years. There is a risk that the censorship and restrictions experienced by Palestinians under physical occupation today will continue to occur in the online world.[13]

In May 2021 pro-Palestinian activists took matters into their own hands and organized a global campaign on social media to downgrade Facebook's app review and give the platform a one-star review. The campaign had an effect, with both the Apple App Store and Google Play Stores seeing a noticeable drop in ratings for Facebook. It was a meaningful, albeit fleeting act, for a people with few resources.

Facebook released a report in September 2022, in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, that assessed its performance in May 2021 during the conflict between Israel and Hamas. It found that "Meta's [Facebook's parent company] actions in May 2021 appear to have had an adverse human rights impact … on the rights of Palestinian users to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, political participation, and non-discrimination, and therefore on the ability of Palestinians to share information and insights about their experiences as they occurred." Due to "unintentional bias," the company deleted far more Arabic content than Hebrew posts on Facebook and Instagram due to a lack of Arabic speakers, institutional bias and flawed machine learning.[14]

Jillian C. York, author of *Silicon Values: The Future of Free Speech under Surveillance Capitalism*, told me that there had been some progress in engaging with Facebook since the May 2021 Israel/Hamas conflict after a campaign launched under the banner of "Stop Silencing Palestine." "Facebook's teams have repeatedly met with a set of experts—the majority of whom are Palestinian or have strong ties to Palestine—and listened to our demands," she said. "They have committed more resources to the issue and are responsive in situations where content is being actively and wrongly removed. They have not, however, committed … to the increases in transparency and appeals that we've asked for."

York remained pessimistic that much might change because the corporations saw no reason to do so. "These companies simply have no real

reason to invest in better measures, particularly those that would help marginalized groups (and particularly groups and communities in the Global South),” she said. “Their motive is profit and their means is selling advertisements. Who are these ads for? Their wealthier users. And where do they therefore put most of their attention? Countries like the United States, the UK, and Germany. Of course, it isn’t just about ads—it’s also true that these countries’ governments demand action from the companies and have the leverage to generate that action.”

This is what I heard from countless Palestinians in Palestine and in the Diaspora: we don’t expect Facebook and other social media platforms to listen to us seriously. We need alternative outlets to be heard. “While a Silicon Valley company might have an incentive to respond to a popular US American social movement,” York explained, “what is their motivation to respond to Palestinians? Or Burmese? Or Indigenous users? These companies are always going to put profit before people—it’s literally their modus operandi.”

None of these issues seemed to bother the big tech firms. Giving lip service to minority group concerns was at best an inconvenience. They doubled down and invested even more in Israel. Staff at Google and Amazon issued a letter in protest in 2021 at the news that their employees had won work for Project Nimbus, a US$1.2 billion contract to provide cloud services to the Israeli government and military. They condemned the trend of these corporations increasingly selling their services to US government departments such as the Department of Defense, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and police departments. In 2022, Google staff quit, including Jewish employee Ariel Koren, and accused the tech company of punishing anyone who questioned its association with Project Nimbus. “Google systematically silences Palestinian, Jewish, Arab and Muslim voices concerned about Google’s complicity in violations of Palestinian human rights—to the point of formally retaliating against workers and creating an environment of fear,” Koren wrote in her resignation letter.

Leaked documents to the *Intercept* in July 2022 confirmed that Google was offering machine learning capabilities and advanced artificial intelligence to the Israeli state. A former head of security for Google Enterprise, now running Oracle in Israel, has publicly stated that one goal of Nimbus is making sure that the German government is unable to access

information on the IDF for the International Criminal Court.[15] An advertised benefit of Project Nimbus, according to the Israeli press, is that tech companies are blocked from cutting off access to the Israeli government in the event of massive boycott pressure on Google and Amazon. It's an insurance policy against potential political headwinds.[16]

"The technology our companies have contracted to build will make the systematic discrimination and displacement carried out by the Israeli military and government even crueler and deadlier for Palestinians," anonymous Google and Amazon workers wrote.[17] In an era of multi national repression, working with Israel was an easy choice for the masters of today's high-tech industries because there was so little political pushback against it.

US Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian-American to be elected to Congress, wrote to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok in May 2021 to ensure that these companies "whether intentional or unintentional, do not have algorithms and staff that silence people based on their ethnicity or religious affiliation." Her office declined to comment when I asked if she had received any responses to her letter from the social media companies.

Facebook has a team of over fifteen thousand content moderators, including native Arabic and Hebrew speakers, who reportedly review content and remove anything that's deemed inappropriate.[18] The company does not release country or regional content takedown details, though it posts online a quarterly Community Standards Enforcement Report to make Facebook and Instagram "safe and inclusive." For example, in the third quarter of 2021, the report said that there were 2 million pieces of content removed because it reflected "organized hate" and 9.8 million pieces as coming from dangerous organizations and individuals.[19] It was impossible to know how many posts, if any, were removed in connection to the conflict in Israel/Palestine. When asked, Facebook refused to tell me.

In May 2021 the Facebook-owned WhatsApp messaging service was used by Israeli mobs to target Arabs and their businesses. One message read in Hebrew, "Shalom to all of Israel's Jewish citizens. I am honored to invite you to take part in a massive attack on Arabs that will take place today at 18:00 in the Bat Yam boardwalk (at Victory). Please arrive with the appropriate gear, brass knuckles, swords, knives, sticks, pistols, and

vehicles with bull bars." The WhatsApp group was called "Attacks on Arabs." This WhatsApp message had real-life impact, because on May 12 an Israeli mob destroyed an Arab-owned ice cream shop in the city of Bat Yam, just south of Tel Aviv. Various weapons were used, including the ones mentioned in the WhatsApp message that was circulated before the attack. Israeli activists who saw the messages had warned the Israeli police, but they were slow to respond. At least twenty proposed attacks by extremist Jews were organized on both WhatsApp and Telegram.[20] These attacks by far-right activists who oppose any mixing between Jews and Arabs are a microcosm of the country's wider issues around the growing intolerance toward non-Jews and moves to cast them out.[21] These messages of hate are often not removed by the platforms on which they appear. Israel's Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai said in September 2022 that during times of conflict in mixed towns, social media should be blocked. "We are a democratic country, but there is a limit," he argued.

The inherent bias of Silicon Valley firms extends far beyond social media. Google Maps, Apple Maps, and Waze are all ubiquitous mapping application services, and yet they only contain a minimal amount of data about the Palestinian landscape. While Israeli settlements are mostly recognized and noted on the maps, hundreds of Palestinian villages simply do not exist on them. When asked about this gap, the companies claim that this is an issue of United Nations rules because Palestine is only a "non-member observer state" and therefore they can't take a position on the correct way to tackle the issue. It's an absurd argument because settlements in the West Bank on the app maps aren't labeled as "disputed," but simply shown as established facts.[22]

I remember regularly traveling around the West Bank and trying to find my way using the Israeli-founded Waze app. I usually got lost. No current mapping apps sufficiently cover Palestine. It was not until 2018 that Israel allowed 3G mobile phone technology to be used across the West Bank, and it is still unclear when 4G will be rolled out despite 5G becoming the ubiquitous setting across the West, including Israel. During his trip to Israel and Palestine in July 2022, US President Joe Biden announced that 4G would be allowed in the West Bank and Gaza by the end of 2023, but Palestinian officials were skeptical.

The Emmy-nominated Palestinian, Kuwaiti, and American journalist, actor, and music producer Ahmed Shihab-Eldin has reported extensively across the Middle East, including in Palestine. In May 2021, as tensions rose between Israel and the Palestinians, he told me that he wanted to share "raw reports from the ground, from trusted sources, along with some commentary, where I did not mince words in the slightest, as I usually might have." He focused on using Reels on Instagram, short-form videos that were being prioritized by the platform's algorithm to challenge the dominance of TikTok.

"I noticed that video shared through Reels with a little subtext and context with roughly edited videos were being shared and receiving incredible visibility," he said. He was relieved that the "censorship and self-censorship" that he'd come to know so well during his fifteen-year journalism career in the mainstream media was finally being broken by the sheer amount of support and interest in his posts. "There was an appetite for the content, a curiosity triggered by the sheer inhumanity of the raw videos, an interest in understanding the context and making sense of what people were witnessing." Over a two-to three-week period, his Instagram account ballooned from 80,000 followers to over 210,000.

But Shihab-Eldin quickly noticed that something was wrong. A number of activists, journalists (including him), and witnesses on the ground who used the "charged but accurate" words such as apartheid, ethnic cleansing, ethnic displacement, and occupation, began finding their accounts or posts shadowbanned. The latter is a practice that involves blocking or reducing the reach of content without the user being fully aware of what is going on.

Shihab-Eldin said that some of his own posts on Instagram would stop loading or receive far fewer views for no apparent reason. "I had hundreds and hundreds of followers asking me through DM [direct message] why my stories were not populating in their feed. It was clear that content was being censored or deprioritized by the algorithm. There was so much momentum and suddenly both on the ground in Israel and Palestine and in the Diaspora, it became clear that content that humanized Palestinians or documented the violence against them by Israel was being targeted."

It is clear that both old media institutions and social media platforms are profit-making businesses, which makes them vulnerable to political pressure, powerful interests, or influential nations. "What started to feel alarming, despite this knowledge, was mass take-downs of the online

content of many Palestinian activists on multiple platforms … This level of censorship and shadow banning was unprecedented."

After writing about his experiences online, Shihab-Eldin was invited to meet with two members of the Meta Public Policy team in Dubai to detail his concerns. He concluded, despite the company's representatives being friendly and open to discussion, that the corporation was "keenly aware of the censorship that was occurring on its platform. Its main defense was that the platform is intended largely for entertainment purposes or to share things with family and friends. Despite being aware of how these platforms were being used to document human rights abuses, that was not the platform's intention."

When challenged on the huge amount of pro-Palestinian content that was removed due to Israeli government pressure, Meta explained that it didn't give Israeli officials any preferential treatment. It was simply because "Israel flags a lot more content and makes a lot more requests than most other governments." The Meta officials didn't explain to Shihab-Eldin's satisfaction why Israeli authorities were able to post without problems huge amounts of content of actual violence—for example, bombings in Gaza—but Palestinians and their supporters were accused of "inciting violence" and censored.

"Every day I'm going to work in Ramallah, I live between Ramallah and Nablus, and I'm driving through two checkpoints," Palestinian digital rights activist Mona Shtaya told me. "When I see cameras on checkpoints, I know this is population control. This creates a policy of fear and self-censorship. I'm always in fear when crossing the checkpoint."

Shtaya works as an advocacy advisor at 7amleh, the Arab Centre for Social Media Advancement. The organization investigates the state of the internet for Palestinians under occupation. A 2020 report detailed the various ways that the Israeli government had pressured the social media giants to censor Palestinian content. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, 7amleh wrote that Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms had removed "hundreds of thousands and perhaps even millions of content documenting protests, uprising, and human rights violations of Palestinians under the guise of 'hate speech.'"[23] Other 7amleh reports reveal that self-censorship is a huge problem among the Palestinian population, fearful of incurring the wrath of Palestinian or Israeli officials.

In cooperation with 7amleh and its work on digital rights, Shtaya tackles three governments—Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Hamas—and none of them supports freedom of speech.[24] In different ways they all aim to control what information is released online, and Palestinians lose out by facing censorship, harassment, arrest, or threats. Palestinians have little faith in either Israeli or Palestinian authorities granting them full online rights. According to a 2022 study by 7amleh, 52 percent believe that their personal data and privacy are not secure.[25]

The concept of digital Palestine, a free space where checkpoints and borders disappear, is not entirely imaginary when compared to the harsh realities of daily life, but it is increasingly restricted by Silicon Valley corporations, the Israeli state, and the Palestinian authorities. Mass surveillance is inevitable. "We may have democracy, or we may have surveillance society, but we cannot have both," writes Shoshana Zuboff, author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* "A democratic surveillance society is an existential and political impossibility."[26]

In 2016, then Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked after meeting with Facebook executives boasted that YouTube, Google, and Facebook were deleting up to 95 percent of Israeli requests to take down material that she claimed was inciting violence. Speaking at a counterterrorism conference in Tel Aviv, Shaked said, "Just as ISIS [Islamic State] video clips are being monitored and removed from the network, we want them to take the same action against Palestinian material that incites terrorism." Shaked has her own history of inciting violence, in 2014 calling Palestinian children "little snakes" and urging the killing of all Palestinians because "they are all enemy combatants." Those comments were not removed from Facebook.

Shtaya explained that the online environment for Palestinians under occupation was caution and suspicion. "I'm living in a militarized space," she said. "It's increased the culture of fear between people, especially for us as activists. Any link that I'm opening online I have to be careful that it's safe." After decades of occupation, Shtaya lamented that "Israel is normalizing this militarized life. In our subconscious as Palestinians, some have accepted the normalization of occupation, but many young Palestinians have not."

Google-owned YouTube is a popular website in Palestine, but its opaque content moderation is a constant frustration, with huge amounts of videos simply removed without explanation. Globally more than five hundred hours of videos are uploaded to the platform every minute. In Palestine, around one-third of Palestinians use social media, mostly Facebook, for around five and a half hours every day. According to research of YouTube done by Palestinian academic Amal Nazzal, assistant professor at the Business and Economics Faculty at Birzeit University in the West Bank, a key problem lies in how YouTube refuses to define terms. “I couldn’t find any information about how YouTube defines content,” Nazzal told me. “I tried to contact YouTube and got no response.”

In her comprehensive 2020 report on YouTube for the Pales-tinianthink-tank Al-Shabaka, Nazzal uncovered a long list of nonviolent videos uploaded by Palestinians that were deleted because they were allegedly “violent.” Videos of Israeli soldiers violently assaulting Palestinians were deemed inappropriate and removed, but Nazzal notes that countless videos of the Israeli army proudly celebrating its violence are left untouched. Israeli pro-gun activists have no problems on YouTube, nor do huge numbers of IDF videos showing the destruction of Gaza.[27]

Nazzal finds that “90 percent of the feedback from YouTube is unfavorable when Palestinians complain about their pages being deleted. Most Palestinians get automatic responses from YouTube saying that content is against community standards. But there’s a double standard because many channels on YouTube have videos that glorify violence and guns.”

Nazzal wants social media companies to better understand the political contexts in which they operate. “You can’t have one definition of words like ‘incitement’ and ‘violence.’ Both humans and AI bias are against the Palestinians because the YouTube philosophy is that the Palestinian community is inherently violent and therefore its content should be closely monitored. This biased treatment should be stopped because YouTube says in its mission statement that it supports free expression.”

Incitement is so broadly defined by Israel that in many cases simply expressing support for Palestinian human rights, sharing a video online, or being opposed to Zionist colonization is deemed inappropriate. Social media posts are increasingly the sole reason a Palestinian will be detained for days, weeks, or months by the Israeli military.

Israel's interest in incitement is highly selective, with very few Israeli Jews detained for the same offenses. This is despite the fact that hate speech on Hebrew-language social media soared in 2020 and 2021, 9 percent higher than the year before, according to the Berl Katznelson Foundation and Vigo research institute. They found that 5.2 million comments either called for violence or were offensive, with Arabs being the main targets of abuse.[28] Palestinian activist Dareen Tatour suffered years of house arrest and months in prison in 2018 for writing a poem that contained the words, "Resist, my people, resist them." Israel accused her of "inciting terrorism."

In her report, Nazzal showed how YouTube used both locative and language discrimination against Palestinian content. Any Arabic-language video was more likely to be flagged, especially if it contained the words 'Hamas,' 'Islamic Jihad,' or 'Hizbollah.' One Palestinian user in the West Bank, Hamed, founder of the YouTube channel Palestine 27k, discovered that one of his videos had been deleted, but in an experiment he sent the exact same video to a European friend, who uploaded it without issue. Other users reported finding that YouTube started tracking their account more heavily as soon as their videos rose in popularity. As a result, even old videos started disappearing, and all this impacted their ability to successfully monetize the content.

Nazzal acknowledges that there is hate speech among some in the Palestinian community, but points out that there is vastly more coming from the Israeli state. "This is colonizer and colonized with thousands of Palestinians inside jails," she said. "Your kid has been killed by Israel and your husband is away in prison, but there's a difference between an individual expressing hate speech and institutionalized hate speech, monitoring, and surveillance by Israel."

There were occasions when Israeli state propaganda was removed. A YouTube ad by the IDF that aimed to justify the bombing of Gaza in May 2021 by featuring Israelis taking shelter from Hamas rockets and children crying was only removed after *Vice* informed Google.[29] The imagery was not inaccurate but deemed to be unduly violent or graphic. And yet the allure of ad dollars spoke louder. After Amnesty International released a report in 2022 that accused Israel of practicing apartheid, users in some countries found that if they searched on Google for the report, the top entry was an Israeli advertisement accusing the NGO of anti-Semitism.[30]

Such “digital orientalism” is the new form of control used by Western social media companies, an agenda that duplicates in the modern era a discriminatory Western lens on the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa. Arabs are once again treated with suspicion by definition.

Israeli intelligence officers in the West Bank manage Facebook pages to promote the idea that the occupation is nonexistent, Palestinian resistance is immoral, and Jews and Arab co-exist peacefully.[31] These accounts are publishing blatantly false information, but are not removed by moderators. This kind of Zionist advocacy is deemed appropriate. As was Israel using secret algorithms that targeted Facebook to deter what were essentially precrime incidents, arresting over eight hundred Palestinians, four hundred by Israel, and another four hundred by the Palestinian Authority, before they had committed any acts of violence but had the supposed potential to do so. Reported by *Haaretz* in 2017, this digital dragnet showed the future of weaponizing social media networks to curtail criticism. Once again Facebook said and did nothing.[32]

Palestinian citizen Sami Janazreh lives near Hebron and was arrested in 2015 for undisclosed reasons. He was not told why and was placed in administrative detention, a limbo state behind bars with no trial or charge.[33] After going on a seventy-one-day hunger strike, Israeli officials told him that he would be standing trial for social media incitement and was shown screenshots of his Facebook posts. “Every Palestinian whom the Shin Bet security service finds has shared a picture of a *shahid* [martyr] or a prisoner, or has written a Facebook post about himself as a Palestinian—they could say this is incitement,” he told *Haaretz*.[34]

How Israel has such influence over Silicon Valley is both obvious and ominous for the future of marginalized groups, because it is not just the Jewish state that has discovered the Achilles heel of big tech. India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi demanded that Facebook remove posts critical of his government’s handling of the Covid pandemic in 2020, and the company mostly complied. Indian government officials had wanted around one hundred posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to be removed because they did not like anything critical of the Modi government online. Some Facebook employees were outraged, worried that the corporation had buckled to a powerful popu-list government. One Facebook

employee wrote internally that the company was acting “out of fear” because it was scared it might be banned from the country.[35]

Facebook was faced with an internal dilemma when it came to managing content from India. With evidence that Facebook posts had caused real harm against minorities in Myanmar, Palestine, India, Russia, and elsewhere, the firm’s global policy team argued that they risked having the platform shut down completely if they did not comply with government requests. In India, calls for genocide against the nation’s Muslim minority have moved from the fringes to the mainstream, often boosted by government support or silent official acquiescence. Leaving those comments up, which routinely happens, is deeply irresponsible.

The role of social media platforms in this febrile context swiftly becomes a matter of life and death. And yet most of them are unwilling to act responsibly (whatever that looks like in practice). Ultimately, if people die, who’s responsible at Facebook or Instagram, and who would be held accountable? The answer is that it’s likely nobody would take the fall.

The selectivity of Facebook moderating in Israel and Palestine is replicated in other countries and conflicts, highlighting the company’s unwillingness or inability to responsibly deesca-late tensions. In Myanmar, Facebook allowed genocidal posts to remain visible and amplified messages of hate against the Muslim minority Rohingya people. This led to army-directed mass violence against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. Face-book was forced to apologize in 2018 for its role in facilitating the genocide. Even though Facebook was shown to have allowed posts advocating ethnic cleansing to remain live in Ethiopia and in response pledged to do better, researchers from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and *Observer* newspaper still found a large number of such posts online in 2022.[36] An Amnesty International report in 2022 found that Facebook “knew or should have known” that its algorithms increased hatred against the Rohingya in 2017 and demanded reparations from the company to those who suffered.[37]

The Russian war against Ukraine in 2022 led to an immediate move by Silicon Valley to demote, block, or censor Russian government accounts. Individuals who wanted to share links with Russian state websites were warned before doing so that they were transmitting information from Moscow-backed outlets. As with most social media platforms, these actions were done with no transparency.

Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine was illegal and brutal, and yet many other repressive regimes favored by the US have not been censored in the same circumstances. Perhaps the strangest part of Facebook's response was allowing users to praise Ukraine's neo-Nazi military unit, the Azov Battalion, despite it being previously banned. Support for this group was suddenly acceptable (and it had been able to recruit via Facebook for a long time).[38] This felt like a decision in lockstep with ever-evolving US foreign policy goals. Facebook has hired dozens of former CIA officials to work on its content policies, TikTok has employed ex-NATO officials, and Twitter has former FBI agents.[39]

Likewise, Facebook decided in March 2022 to allow comments on both Facebook and Instagram in some countries to call for violence against Russian soldiers, against Russia in the context of its war against Ukraine, and Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and other neighboring states.[40] "In light of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine," a Meta spokesman told CNN, "we made a temporary exception for those affected by war to express violent sentiments toward invading armed forces such as 'death to the Russian invaders.' These are temporary measures designed to preserve voice and expression for people who are facing invasion."

Although calls for violence were routinely left up by Facebook moderators around the world, at one point Meta stopped assessing whether human moderators were appropriately removing content related to the Ukraine conflict because the rules were changing so regularly and inexplicitly; allowing an unaccountable corporation to make this decision was an unprecedented move.[41] It was clear that the company had no real policy around war and made up the rules on a day-by-day basis.

Palestinian activist Mona Shtaya noted the glaring double standards between Ukraine and Palestine and how social media companies viewed the two conflicts. One was legitimate and moral while the other one deserved silencing. One occupier was evil while the other deserved respect. "Social media companies' swift steps to protect Ukrainians' free speech, especially in a time of war, was shocking to many Palestinians," she wrote, because they had experienced the exact opposite policy during the May 2021 Hamas/Israel war. Nonetheless, she supported the tech platforms and their support for Ukraine, but hoped it would lead to a rethinking of online rules

to “help other oppressed groups around the world—be they Palestinians, Kashmiris, Uyghurs, indigenous peoples of Colombia and Western Sahara, Myanmarese, and other communities.”[42]

Powerful governments pressure and bully social media companies with little serious pushback from minority communities because these groups do not have the power or access to do so.[43] Facebook appointed Jordana Cutler as its public policy director for Israel and the Jewish Diaspora in 2016. She is a former advisor to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and chief of staff at the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC. In 2020 she said, “My job is … to speak at Facebook on behalf of Israel and the Jewish diaspora. We have meetings every week to talk about everything from spam to pornography to hate speech and bullying and violence, and how they relate to our community standards. I represent Israel in these meetings.”[44]

There’s no Palestine-based Facebook representative. Its people and the hundreds of millions of other Arabs in twenty-five countries in the region are covered by the Dubai-based Middle East and North Africa policy chief, Azzam Alameddin. The former Facebook executive who served in the same role as Alameddin, Ashraf Zeitoon, recalled arguing with Cutler about whether the West Bank should be “occupied territories” in company rules. Another former Facebook content moderator, Mai Elmahdy, said that Israeli members of the global policy team pressured their colleagues on possible takedowns and general policy directions. No pro-Palestinian points of view were present in these discussions.[45]

A former Facebook employee who worked in community operations, Maria, told Jillian C. York of the Electronic Frontier Foundation that content moderation was based on a deeply flawed system. Documents published by the *Guardian* in 2017 revealed how Palestinian voices were silenced. One document was titled “Credible Violence: Abuse Standards,” and listed “vulnerable” groups including foreigners, homeland people, and Zionists. Maria told York, “We’d say being a Zionist isn’t like being a Hindu or Muslim or white or Black—it’s like being a revolutionary socialist, it’s an ideology. And now, almost everything related to Palestinian is getting deleted.”[46]

Another internal document obtained by the *Intercept* in 2021 revealed the rules regarding how to moderate the word “Zionist.” There was very little room to allow criticism of Zionism because it was deemed hate

speech. A document used by the huge number of low-paid content moderators expected them to determine whether Zionist was being used as a proxy for Jew including on posts about Israeli settlements. It gave one example that demanded removal: "Delete: Parent Content, 'Israeli settlers refuse to leave houses built on Palestinian territory'; Comment, 'Fuck Zionists!'"[47] While the word "Zionist" can be used in an anti-Semitic smear, it removes the ability of Palestinians to condemn the daily violence and oppression by Zionist actors. Many Palestinians and Arabs use the word "Zionist" when referencing colonization of Palestinian lands and not to demonize Jews.

Facebook has faced enormous pressure to curtail the amount of pro-Palestinian content on its platform from the Zionist and evangelical Christian lobbies in the US.[48] In 2020, over 120 organizations sent a letter to the Facebook Board of Directors urging them to "fully adopt" the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism. The IHRA is a problematic document because it aims to proscribe most criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic and conflates anti-Zionism with Jew hatred. Nonetheless, the coalition said Facebook must adopt IHRA guidelines "to protect Jewish users from hate speech and imagery that incites hate and oftentimes leads to violence."

Facebook has not officially adopted the IHRA guidelines but appears to be using some of its recommendations. Monika Bickert, Facebook's vice president of content policy, responded to the petitioners and wrote that the company "draws on the spirit—and the text—of the IHRA," and that under Face-book's policy, "Jews and Israelis are treated as 'protected characteristics.'"[49]

The irony with Facebook's default setting toward the conflict lies in its failures in successfully stamping out Holocaust denial and real anti-Semitism on the site, issues with far more resonance to Jews and other minorities. White supremacist groups openly organize on the platform. There are legitimate questions around whether social media platforms should be removing content at all when it is simply stating an opinion and not advocating violence.[50] The rise in far-right, anti-Semitic violence and Holocaust revisionism is not caused by Facebook, but it is certainly fueled by the platform's ability to spread the message so fast and widely.

Yet as a Jew I am uncomfortable and even nervous with the ability of Facebook, Twitter, and others to amplify on a massive, global scale gross material that denies the historical fact that the Holocaust or any other genocide happened. I feel similarly about demonizing Jews or any other minority group. Then again, who gives Facebook moderators or its opaque AI algorithms the right to decide what is deemed appropriate? Holocaust commemoration is an undeniably tricky business; what one person finds offensive may appeal to another, and yet many online platforms struggle with it.

A number of mainly young female TikTok users in the last years have dressed up as Holocaust victims, pretending to be in a Nazi death camp, using makeup to resemble blood or dressing up in prison uniforms. Some people find this deeply offensive, cheapening a genocide, but for others, including me, I see its relevance to a new generation who want to remember the event in a modern way. This is not Holocaust denialism, but many of the users experienced extreme criticism after posting their short videos.[51]

The pressure on Facebook by the pro-Israel lobby coincides with the growing, successful attempts to convince nations to adopt the IHRA and US states to increasingly legislate anti-boycott laws that target anyone who refuses to do business with illegal West Bank settlements. As Israeli actions in Palestine have become more extreme, its supporters in the West have ratcheted up their actions to try and silence criticism of it. Rather than focus on the deepening occupation and ending it, Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs developed an online community and app called ACT.IL, an army of trolls to pester social media companies and media outlets for publishing content that's critical of Israel.

After facing an avalanche of criticism over its perceived role in electing Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, Facebook responded by establishing an Oversight Board, a US Supreme Court–type body. Its members were selected from across the world and included Emi Palmor, the former director general of Israel's Justice Ministry. Palestinians are not currently represented on the board. When Palmor was announced as a founding member, Palestinians reacted with anger, citing her previous role in the Justice Ministry pressuring social media platforms to take down content that was critical of Israel.[52]

Palmor denied having any role in these activities and hoped to be present when the Oversight Board adjudicated any cases involving anti-Semitism. “Obviously by being Israeli and being Jewish … I have an opinion on these issues and I have a deeper understanding than anyone else on the board,” she told the *Jerusalem Post*.[53]

The power of the Oversight Board is questionable, since it is nominally independent but still funded by a Facebook trust. A spokeswoman for the board insisted to me that it was “independent and operates separately from Meta.” Nonetheless, the company’s executive had input in selecting the board members. A decision in September 2021 went to the heart of the board’s abilities. The board found that a post from May 2021 talking about Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Sheikh Jarrah area had been removed in error and Facebook reinstated it. The board commented on the “allegations” that Facebook was censoring Palestinian posts after Israeli government demands and they had asked Facebook “whether the company had received official and unofficial requests from Israel to remove content related to the April/May conflict. Facebook responded that it had not received a valid legal request from a government authority related to the user’s content in this case but declined to provide the remaining information requested by the Board.”[54]

Facebook must abide by the board’s decisions but does not have to implement its recommendations. To its credit, the Oversight Board recommended that the company hire “an independent entity not associated with either side [of the conflict] to conduct a thorough examination to determine whether Face-book’s content moderation in Arabic and Hebrew, including its use of automation, have been applied without bias.”

According to documents released by Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen in 2021, her former employer spent remarkably few resources on monitoring content produced outside the US. Facebook knew that it wasn’t investing enough in hiring staff and AI learning to decode the over 160 languages used on the platform. Haugen said that 87 percent of the money spent on battling misinformation is directed on English-language content though only 9 percent of users speak English. Mass violence, genocide, and killings in Myanmar and Ethiopia could be directly linked to this deficit, Haugen said, because content that achieved huge engagement was prioritized without proper safety checks in place.

Too often Facebook appears to be freelancing when it comes to silencing Palestinian voices, though it's impossible to know if Israel has pressured them. When Palestinian political activist Khalida Jarrar was unjustly imprisoned in 2021, Israel refused her request to attend her daughter Suha's funeral. A friend of Jarrar, Omar Nazzal, had posted a letter on Facebook from her. "Suha came into the world while her father was in jail, and she is leaving the world while her mother is in jail," Jarrar had written. Five hours later, Facebook informed Nazzal that her account would be blocked for two months because the post "goes against our standards on dangerous individuals and organizations, so only you can see it."

What was contained on that secret list of "dangerous individuals and organizations" had remained secret for years, a black box of uncertainty that gave millions of users no indication of what would be removed or left up. The *Intercept* obtained the list and associated rules and published them in 2021. They were, the outlet wrote, "a clear embodiment of American anxieties, political concerns, and foreign policy values since 9/11, experts said, even though the … policy is meant to protect all Face-book users and applies to those who reside outside of the United States (the vast majority)."

The outlet continued: "Nearly everyone and everything on the list is considered a foe or threat by America or its allies: Over half of it consists of alleged foreign terrorists, free discussion of which is subject to Facebook's harshest censorship."[55] The terrorists listed are mostly Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern, and white antigovernment militias are given more freedom than proscribed individuals of color.

What is at stake if society does not take some form of control back from big tech and social media platforms is explained by Shoshana Zuboff in the conclusion to her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. "The aim now [for these corporations] is not to dominate nature but rather human nature," she wrote. "The focus has shifted from machines that overcome the limits of bodies to machines that modify the behavior of individuals, groups and populations in the service of market objectives."[56]

What this means in practice, especially for groups without serious political influence in Western capitals including the Palestinians, is to fight back against being little more than a way to make huge amounts of money for big tech firms. The Face-book ideology was rarely better articulated than by then senior Facebook executive Andrew Bosworth, now chief

technology officer at Meta, who in a leaked 2016 memo admitted that the sole corporate goal was to “connect people [and collect data] … That’s why all the work we do in growth is justified … That can be bad if they make it negative. Maybe it costs someone a life by exposing someone to bullies … Maybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools … The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is de facto good.”

The loss of lives due to Facebook was apparently a risk worth taking. Palestinians could rightly argue that being occupied by Israel is not a concern to the company because nothing can get in the way of endless growth. Apartheid is just a speed bump on the way toward a higher share price.

Although Bosworth dismissed the post after it became public in 2018 and he was condemned by Mark Zuckerberg for its contents, it was a moment of rare honesty for the company. Without alternative ways to communicate on more diverse platforms, and a rejection of the rigged rules written in secret by Facebook, Google, and other big tech companies, Palestinians and other marginalized groups will never get justice or a fair hearing.

Conclusion

They [the world] will become more like us than we will become like them.

Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli prime minister

In the weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Israeli journalist and columnist Gideon Levy reminded his readers of an uncomfortable truth. He told them that their long-held belief, that military power was all that matters to stay alive and prosper, was a lie. "The lesson Israel should be learning from Ukraine is the opposite," he wrote. "Military power is not enough, it is impossible to survive alone, we need true international support, which can't be bought just by developing drones that drop bombs."

Levy explained that the age of the Jewish state paralyzing the world when it cries "anti-Semitism" was coming to a close. He hoped that the world's "guilt" because of the Holocaust would soon end and allow it to finally challenge Israeli violence and occupation. "If Israel continues to rely so much on its military power, the guilt and emotional extortion and the power that comes with it will wane," he warned.[1]

This was a view that has rarely appeared in the Western media. Israel is still often framed as a thriving if beleaguered democracy and a key ally in the battle against extremism. Its status as a leading defense exporter is legendary, willing to militarily assist, arm, or train the majority of nations on earth. Very few other countries can match this stature.

"The growth of Israel's defense industries is a story of success inseparable from the history of the State of Israel and the entire Zionist project," wrote right-wing Israeli think-tank, the Jerusalem Institute for

Strategy and Security, in 2018. “Israel’s defense industries are a source of national pride—and rightfully so.”[2]

Only occasionally is this image ruptured. For example, when Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch accuse Israel of being an apartheid state. Or when Ret. Army Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, the former chief of staff to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, declared in 2021 that Israel might not exist in twenty years’ time because it is a “strategic liability of the first order for the United States” and becoming an “apartheid state.”[3]

Nonetheless, Israel’s position as a global leader in surveil-lance, drones, and ethno nationalist fervor will not dim anytime soon. There is currently no political or financial price being paid by Israelis for maintaining this system. If anything, Russia’s actions in Ukraine will fuel the global arms race, especially in Europe, to invest even more money in the most lethal offensive and defensive weapons from drones to missiles and surveillance tech to phone-hacking tools. Israel is a direct beneficiary of this surging investment.

Israel has perfected and led the “global pacification industry,” a term coined by Israeli-American writer and academic Jeff Halper in his book *War against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification*. He explains that the occupation is not a financial burden on the state but the exact opposite, both in terms of Palestine being an invaluable testing ground for new equipment on behalf of a global military hegemon serving other militaries across the globe. “Israel is a small country scrambling to carve out a niche in the transnational military-industrial complex,” Halper writes.[4]

Israel’s Palestine laboratory thrives on global disruption and violence. The worsening climate crisis will benefit Israel’s defense sector in a future where nation-states do not respond with active measures to reduce the impacts of surging temperatures but instead ghettoize themselves, Israel-style. What this means in practice is higher walls and tighter borders, greater surveillance of refugees, facial recognition, drones, smart fences, and biometric databases. By 2025, the border surveillance industrial complex is estimated to be worth US$68 billion, and Israeli companies like Elbit are guaranteed to be among the main beneficiaries.[5]

The population of the West Bank is expected to reach at least 1.1 million Jews by 2050, giving ample opportunity for ongoing conflict

between Jews and Palestinians.[6] Settler groups are always looking for new opportunities to increase their numbers. It's conceivable that willing evangelical Christians, one of the Jewish state's biggest backers, could be a major group looking to emigrate to the West Bank in years to come, hugely boosting the population to well over 1 million before 2050. According to Israeli demographer Arnon Soffer in 2022, Jews are now a minority in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, making up less than 47 percent of the entire population.

When Israel took in thousands of Ukrainian Jews after the Russian invasion in 2022, settlers distributed a leaflet in Russian that offered assistance in "hosting" them in "towns and settlements of Judea and Samaria [the Biblical name of the West Bank]." One commentator urged a rewrite: "Fleeing occupation? Let us help you become the occupier!"[7]

Israel's colonization program is constantly evolving, the borders seemingly open to endless expansion. "The frontiers of the occupied territories are not rigid or fixed at all," wrote Eyal Weizman, the British-Israeli architect and director of research group Forensic Architecture, in his 2012 book *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. "Rather, they are elastic, and in constant transformation … These borders are dynamic, constantly shifting, ebbing and flowing; they creep along, stealthily surrounding Palestinian villages and roads."[8]

The growing number of settlers will boost tensions with Palestinians and help facilitate development of new methods of control and separation to isolate and politically defang the population of occupied Palestine. Think weapons, more sophisticated borders and walls, and mass surveillance. By 2050, a third of the Israeli Jewish population will be Ultra-Orthodox Jews with close to 16 million people in the entire country, almost ensuring an even more conservative future.

What Israel hopes will continue to extend its appeal, beyond nations that just want some of the most intrusive and lethal military equipment on the planet, is the growth of states that share its commitment to ethnonationalism. Such countries stand proudly for religious observance and against multiculturalism and liberal values. They blame a socially indulgent left for undermining traditional ideals and replacing them with morally confused perspectives on race, gender, marriage, and sexuality.

The conservative Israeli political theorist Yoram Hazony has explained his vision, and it paints a frightening picture for minorities. It is a view shared by a sizable bulk of the Israeli Jewish population. He argues that America is a Christian nation with a Christian majority and therefore Christians must choose the country's laws and social rules. Minorities could get "carve-outs," but the majority must be dominant.[9] In Israel, this dictates an aggressive Jewish majority ruling over non-Jews by increasingly brutal means to quell any resistance. The extreme force, surveillance, and technology needed to achieve that is what Israel hopes will keep its experience relevant to other like-minded states.

In his 2019 book *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazony mentions the Palestinians only once, complaining that the world harasses Israel to grant the Palestinians statehood (presumably against Israel's wishes). Instead, Hazony rails against opponents of apartheid South Africa and Serbia under the autocrat Slobodan Milošević. He argues that "the reason these people were singled out for special hatred and disgust, and for special punishment, is that white South Africans and Serbs are seen as Europeans, and are held to a moral standard that is without any relation to what is expected of their African or Muslim neighbors." Clearly Hazony worries that Israel will suffer the same fate as these two rogue states for simply being European.[10]

This kind of toxic ideology fuels Israel's daily reality in Palestine by propagating the lie that Palestinians are inherently violent and irrational: they can't help being terrorists. In this telling, being occupied for more than half a century is a mere footnote. The Palestinians need to be monitored, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Israel needs to keep them in a high-tech cage because the alternative is genocide against the Jews.

The need for Israelis and Palestinians to live together in peace has long been obvious, but mostly dismissed as unrealistic by opponents. The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said told a journalist from Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper in 1986, "Every Israeli realizes that they have no military option against us. What are they going to do? Kill everybody? So some of us say, we fight on. And we keep saying, we're going to live together with you. That no matter what they do, we're a shadow."[11]

Yet extreme incitement and visions of mass expulsions of Arabs are an increasingly popular stance. Thus Likud MP Miki Zohar, while announcing new, proposed legislation in 2022 that included prison terms for flying the

Palestinian flag and deporting Palestinian families of supposed terrorists, claimed, “The Arabs are taking over the country. We see it every day. They abuse Jews. They do what they want. They go out to violent demonstrations that sometimes lead to lynchings. They trample on Israeli flags.”

The mere sight of the Palestinian flag triggers Israeli politicians. The Likud politician Israel Katz warned Palestinians that they would experience another “Nakba.” He gave a speech in the Israeli parliament in May 2022. “Yesterday I warned the Arab students who are flying Palestine flags at universities,” he said. “Remember ’48. Remember our independence war and your Nakba, don’t stretch the rope too much … If you don’t calm down we’ll teach you a lesson that won’t be forgotten.”

Yet another Israeli politician, Deputy Religious Affairs Minister Matan Kahana, called for ethnic cleansing. He told high school students in the illegal Gush Etzion settlement of Efrat in 2022 that “if there was a button that could be pressed, that would remove all the Arabs from here, send them on an express train to Switzerland—where they would live an amazing life, I wish them all the best in Switzerland—I would press that button.”

The surging racist incitement and actions against Palestinians caused even the *Jerusalem Post* editor-in-chiefYaakovKatz, head of a pro-settler media outlet, to admit in 2022 that “a significant percentage of Israel has taken a turn to the far right. They use terminology borrowed from white supremacists in the US.”[12] It was an extraordinary admission that led to few suggestions by the paper beyond pushing for better education.

Ironically, it’s only in the Israeli press, namely *Haaretz*, and not in the US media (at least in the mainstream) that the most honest appraisal of Israel appears. The Palestinian media, and many in the Arab world, have been accurately reporting the situation for decades. Jewish journalist Amira Hass, who lives in Ramallah, wrote in *Haaretz* in 2022 that Israel is now a “Jewish mutation” due to its embrace of messianic Jewish supremacism. It’s only a matter of time, Hass warns, that these Jews will be a majority in the Israeli parliament.[13]

The worst-case scenario, long feared but never realized, is ethnic cleansing against occupied Palestinians or population transfer, forcible expulsion under the guise of national security. A catastrophic war between Israel, Iran, or Hizbollah could trigger an overwhelming argument within Israel that Palestinians, potentially protesting in support of their Arab

brethren, are undermining the state's integrity. An Israeli military operation might then be undertaken to ensure a mass exodus, with the prospect of Palestinians returning to their homes a remote possibility.[14]

In a 2016 poll conducted by Pew Research Center, nearly half of Israeli Jews supported the transfer or expulsion of Arabs. And some 60 percent of Israeli Jews backed complete separation from Arabs, according to a study in 2022 by the Israeli Democracy Institute. The majority of Israeli Jews polled online in 2022 supported the expulsion of people accused of disloyalty to the state, a policy advocated by popular far-right politician Itamar Ben-Gvir.

The re-election of Netanyahu as prime minister in November 2022, with the most extreme right-wing coalition in the country's history, signaled an escalation in the threats facing Palestinians. The far-right Religious Zionism alliance became the third-biggest political bloc in the Knesset, advocating Jewish supremacism and forced removal of Palestinians. It was the equivalent of the KKK breaking down the door brandishing an assault weapon.

This book is written as a warning of the frightening world that could be born if Israeli-style ethnonationalism continues its ascent in a century already dominated by unaccountable state power from Russia and Israel to China and the United States. Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the unprecedented nature of Western outrage and sanctions against it, indicates what is possible when there is unquestioning uniformity of opinion against an enemy state's actions. It's inconceivable that similar boycott, divestment, and sanction initiatives would be taken against other human rights abusers, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel—all friends of Washington and London. Our friends can kill and maim with impunity.

Israel has sold so much defense equipment to so many nations that it hopes to insulate itself from any political backlash to its endless occupation. Allies, whether real or transactional, have given Israel the protection it craves from international censure or appearances at the International Criminal Court. Selling the NSO Group phone-hacking tool Pegasus and a host of other high-tech weaponry is the kind of arms policy that ensures alliance and friendship, whether from authoritarian or democratic states. Israel prides itself as the indispensable nation.

The strategy has worked so far because Israel fears nothing more than being labeled as another Russia, invading and occupying a foreign territory and suffering an avalanche of condemnation. Moscow is facing the economic consequences of its actions. Meanwhile, Israel has spent decades delegitimizing the “peace process” with the Palestinians while never being interested in making peace. It needs the world to legitimize its occupation and sells the technology used to maintain that occupation as a calling card.[15]

Without a huge international campaign of isolating Israel over its human rights abuses, or some targeted court cases against Israeli weapons firms that sell equipment to repressive states, the industry will continue to thrive.[16] Huge profits are the allure. Morality has nothing to do with it. “Because it [Israeli arms dealing] happens in Third World countries and is a field shrouded in mystery,” a former senior defense industry official said in 2020. “It’s gotten a bad reputation over the years. But the truth is that all of Israel benefits from defense exports, which provide a living for tens of thousands of people here.”[17]

But censure must happen if the Palestine laboratory is to lose its luster. In 2020, the UN Human Rights Council released a list of companies, local and foreign, operating in illegal West Bank settlements and East Jerusalem. It included Airbnb, Booking. com, Expedia, JCB, TripAdvisor, and Motorola Solutions. None of these firms stopped operating there because there was barely any public or political pressure to do so. Israel was not Putin’s Russia. Bruno Stagno, deputy executive director for advocacy at Human Rights Watch, said that the UN report of offending corporations should “put all companies on notice: to do business with illegal settlements is to aid in the commission of war crimes.”[18]

With little fanfare, however, many institutional investors have started to divest from Israeli companies, citing concerns over complicity in Israeli abuses. KLP, Norway’s biggest pension fund with US$95 billion in assets, dropped sixteen companies in 2021 for an “unacceptable risk contribution to human rights abuses” in West Bank settlements. In the same year, the New Zealand Super Fund sold US$6.5 million of its holdings in five Israeli banks, claiming “credible evidence that the excluded companies provide project finance for the construction of unlawful Israeli settlements.”[19]

The tide may thus be turning. In 2021, the Responsible Investor website discovered that 67 percent of investment managers thought that human rights would soon become a mainstream investment consideration, not dissimilar to the current centrality of climate change. It's becoming increasingly untenable to invest in companies that collude with repression in China, Myanmar—or Palestine.

Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack, one of the most persistent advocates of exposing past and current Israeli defense deals, says that his hope is to convince enough Israelis that selling death and misery around the world is the worst kind of legacy. "There's a tradition in Israel of hearing testimony about the truth of the Holocaust," he told me, "so maybe the media or the public would be ready to read about other countries' suffering and Israeli involvement in it."

"Of course it's a contradiction with most Israelis being indifferent to the occupation," he continued, "but I found out that many Israelis could connect to the story of the arms sales and the casualties of it, plus see the ties to Jewish morality and history. From the extreme right wing to the extreme left, many Israelis understand this connection." However, only a tiny percentage of Israeli Jews are pushing to end Israel's defense relationships. Looking for accountability through the Israeli court justice, Mack said, is over. "It's time to move on from the legal aspect to bring the campaign to another arena because the Israeli court system won't bring justice."

Israel and its supporters must make a choice between their commitment to Zionism and adherence to liberal values. It's impossible to continue to believe in both, considering the state of apartheid across both Israel and Palestine.[20] The Israeli defense industry is banking on its prowess to continue impressing global clients. In a time of conflict, insecurity, and growing concern over climate change, that's a safe bet. Israel has the tools to help any nation that can pay avoid the worst aspects of societal collapse, at least for a time.

Yet Israel will need to be constantly on its guard, avoiding the endlessly exhausting number of catastrophic outcomes that could befall it from a surge in worldwide BDS support to inspiring Palestinian leadership that isn't corruptible.[21] Losing its reputation as a pariah nation, with public

opinion in many countries steadily turning against the Jewish state, will be impossible without a radical change in its behavior and defense policies.

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As a human being and Jew, I know that equality and justice between Israelis and Palestinians is the only way to resolve this conflict. This book is my contribution to ending decades of discrimination and exposing the secret ways in which it has endured.

The future is not yet written.

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